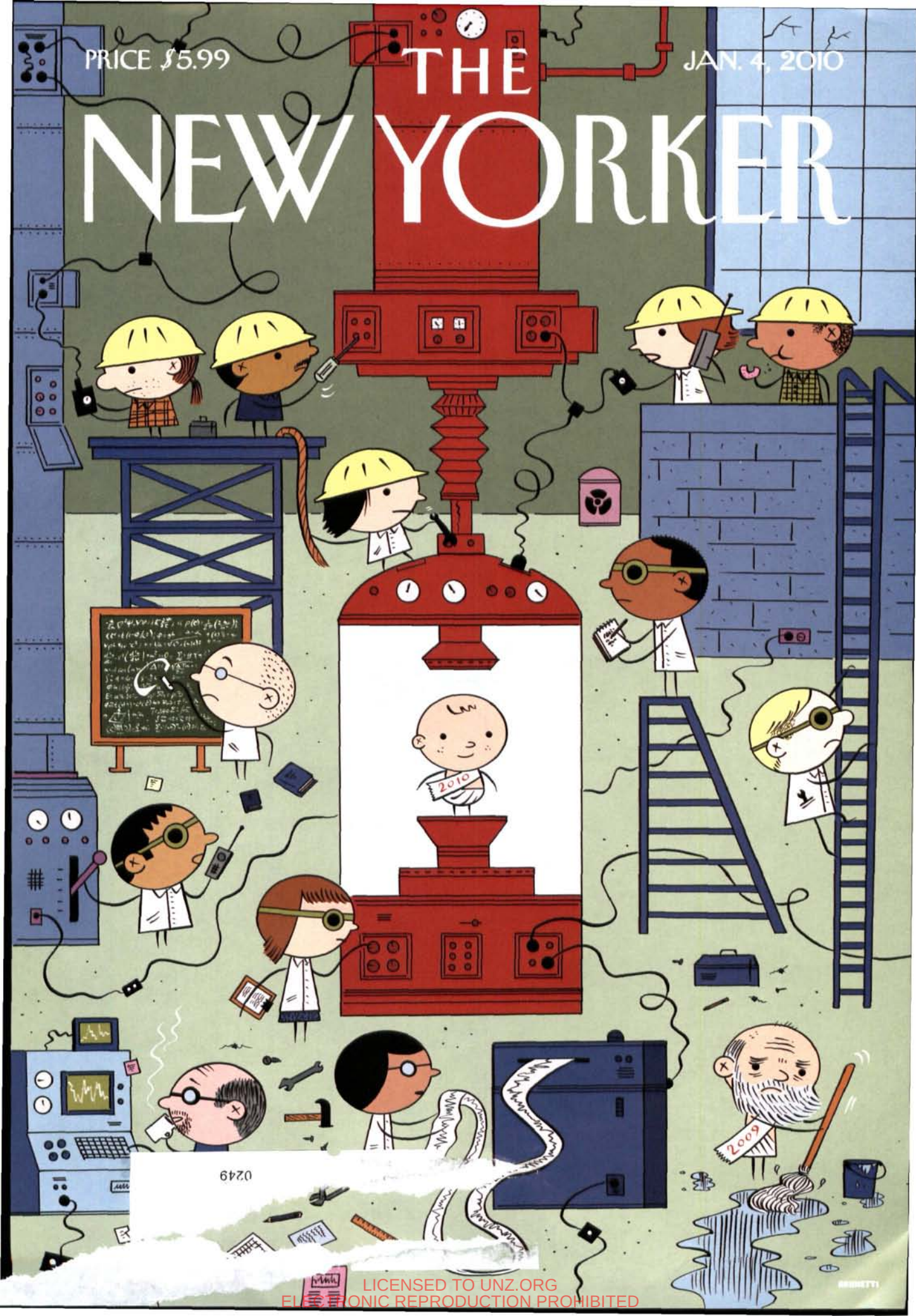


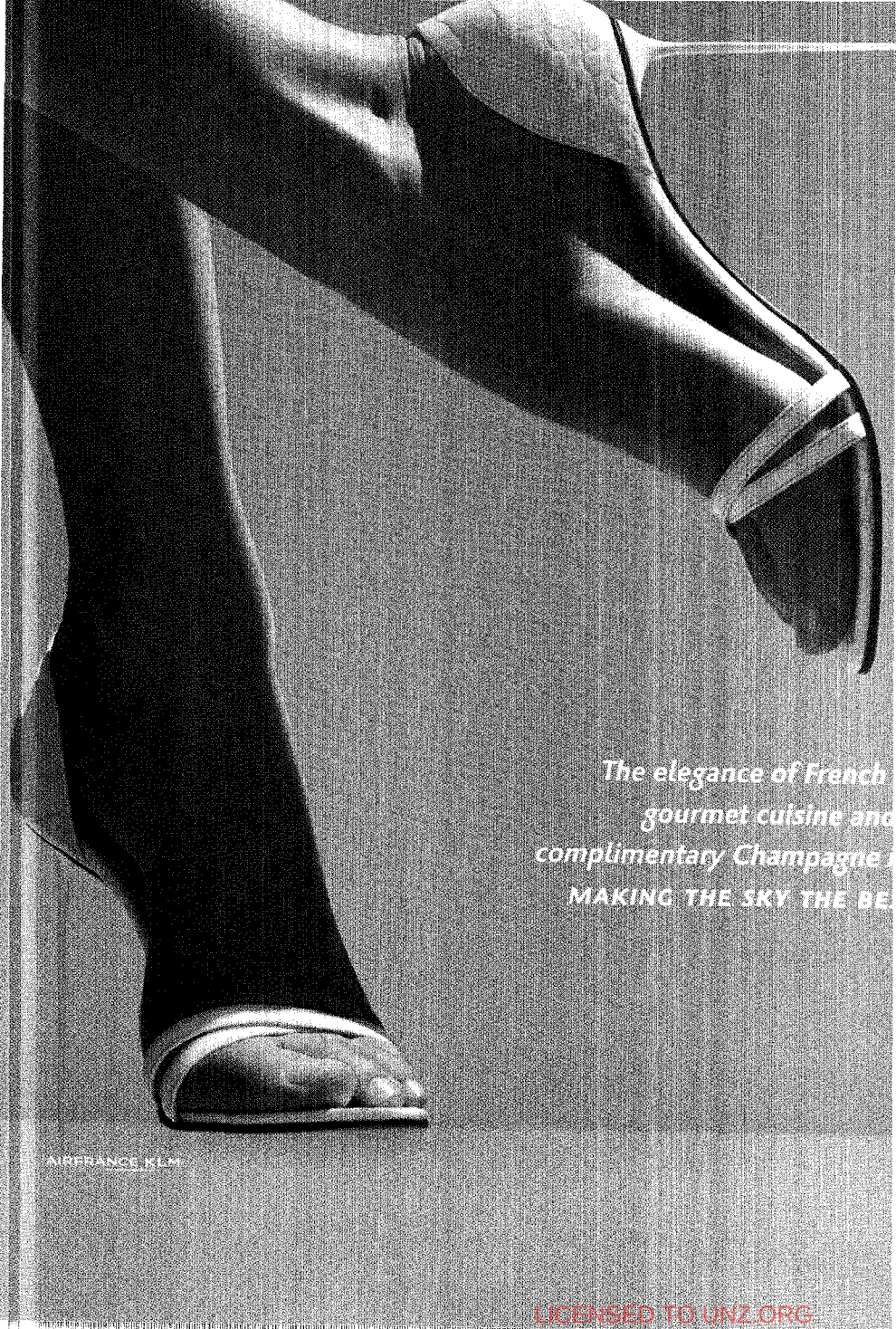
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4 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

17 THE TALK OF THE TOWN

*Rebecca Mead on the decade with no name;
James Surowiecki on risk and health care.*

Tad Friend 22 LETTER FROM CALIFORNIA

Protest Studies

Berkeley rebels again.

Paul Slansky 29 SHOUTS & MURMURS

2009: The Quiz

Lizzie Widdicombe 31 ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

School of Rock

Vampire Weekend on tour.

Nick Paumgarten 36 PROFILES

Food Fighter

The Whole Foods C.E.O. vs. his customers.

Adam Gopnik 48 A CRITIC AT LARGE

Van Gogh's Ear

A modern-art Christmas story.

Uwem Akpan 56 FICTION

"Baptizing the Gun"

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

Anthony Lane 66 *Donald Spoto's "High Society:*

The Life of Grace Kelly."

73 Briefly Noted

Alex Ross 74 MUSICAL EVENTS

"One Evening," with Schubert and Beckett.

David Denby 76 THE CURRENT CINEMA

"Avatar," "Sherlock Holmes."

POEMS

Donald Hall 25 "The Things"

Rachel Hadas 44 "Only So Much"

COVER "Ring Out the Old, Ring In the New," by Ivan Brunetti DRAWINGS Charles Barsotti, Michael Crawford, Robert Mankoff, Michael Maslin, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Kim Warp, Drew Dernaovich, Sidney Harris, David Sipress, Shannon Wheeler, Jack Ziegler, Gahan Wilson, Julia Suits, Mick Stevens, Roz Chast, William Hamilton, Zachary Kanin SPOTS Tibor Kárpáti

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Adam Gopnik ("Van Gogh's Ear," p. 48) has written several books, including "Angels and Ages: A Short Book About Darwin, Lincoln, and Modern Life." This article was adapted from his recent Duncan Phillips Lecture.

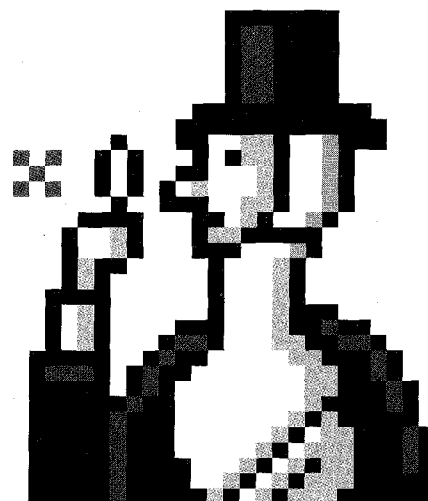
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Alex Ross (Musical Events, p. 74) writes about music for the magazine.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

Reflections by *New Yorker* contributors on the year in news and culture, and on the turn of the decade. / Ask the Author: *Nick Paumgarten* takes readers' questions about Whole Foods in a live chat. / The New Yorker Out Loud: *David Denby* and *Richard Brody* talk to *Blake Eskin* about "Avatar" and their favorite films of the decade. / Video: *Richard Brody's* DVD of the Week; a new Finger Painting by *Jorge Colombo*. / *James Surowiecki's* notes on this week's column. / Enter the Cartoon Kit and Eustace Tilley contests. / The caption contest, plus a complete archive of issues, back to 1925.



THE MAIL

THE HEALTH-CARE PROBLEM

I enjoyed Jill Lepore's brief history of the various failed attempts to enact national health insurance (The Talk of the Town, December 7th). I participated in one attempt that wasn't mentioned: In September, 1971, at the age of eighteen, I was hired by the Committee for National Health Insurance, a union-supported organization designed to win passage of Senator Edward Kennedy's Health Security Act. The H.S.A. would have provided health-care insurance to all Americans. I stayed on through the following year—an election year—since national health insurance was to be a top domestic issue. During that era, health-care costs constituted what was then considered an outrageous percentage of the gross domestic product—almost eight per cent. Walter Reuther, the brilliant leader of the United Auto Workers, had visited Kennedy and explained that passage of the act was the only way to give workers—and all Americans—freedom as well as control of health-care costs. Many years later, Kennedy told me that it was tragic that the H.S.A. had not passed in the early seventies. Today, health-care costs consume upward of seventeen per cent of the gross domestic product—more than double what it was in the seventies.

Marc E. Chafetz
Washington, D.C.

RULES OF COMPETITION

Ariel Levy's article about the elite South African runner Caster Semenya was fascinating ("Either/Or," November 30th). As a running coach, I was reminded of the ongoing case of Oscar Pistorius, a challenged runner who is also from South Africa. Pistorius, a gifted sprinter who has prosthetics that may be performance-enhancing, has been crusading for the right to run against able-bodied athletes. For both Pistorius and Semenya, the issue isn't as simple as the right of these athletes to define themselves and to participate in the sports they love; it's also about the other athletes they want to

compete against. The critical question is whether these two individuals, through no fault of their own, have unfair advantages over other athletes. In considering these cases, we have to remember that Semenya and Pistorius are fighting not just for the right to participate but for the right to win—and that means that someone else will lose. On behalf of these other athletes, we are required to question whether Semenya's and Pistorius's participation is fair, and cannot, as some South African officials and commentators would apparently like to do, simply dismiss the inquiry as inappropriate. I don't mean to imply that Semenya and Pistorius should necessarily be denied the right to compete; I just don't want anyone to lose sight of the fact that the rights of other athletes are at stake here as well.

Jeff Horowitz
Washington, D.C.

WORLD LEADERS

The most striking characteristic of Platon's elegant "Portraits of Power" was its depiction of power as masculine (Portfolio, December 7th). Of the dozens of faces chosen to represent power across the world, only three were those of women. While we might like to think that gender inequality is behind us, Platon's portraits show us that this is not so. Quite frankly, I found the clarity and the accuracy of this representation somewhere between disheartening and terrifying. As a woman working in a male-dominated discipline, I look forward to the year when *The New Yorker* can print a similar picture of power embodied in females' faces.

Kascha Semonovitch
Professor of Philosophy
Seattle University
Seattle, Wash.

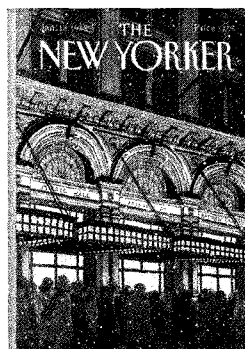
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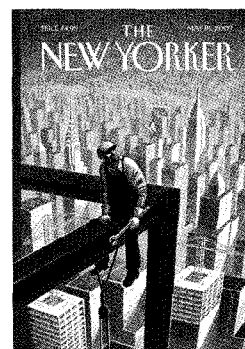
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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

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			30	31	1	2
3	4	5				

THIS WEEK

THE THEATRE WAR STORIES

Donald Margulies ("Dinner with Friends") presents a new drama about out-of-commission war journalists. Laura Linney, Alicia Silverstone, Brian d'Arcy James, and Eric Bogosian star in "Time Stands Still," a Manhattan Theatre Club production, at the Samuel J. Friedman; Daniel Sullivan directs. (See page 6.)

NIGHT LIFE DOUBLE PLEASURE

New Year's Eve celebrations are often big-ticket events

with a single act. You pay your money and you're stuck with the show. At the Bell House, in Brooklyn, there's a double bill that costs no more than a regular night out, featuring the local post-punkers of Obits and the Boston-based blue-eyed soul singer Eli (Paperboy) Reed. (See page 7.)

ART HEAD OF THE GLASS

Among the medieval gems at the Cloisters are some exceptional panels in stained glass, from a mercifully ungrisly rendition of the martyrdom of St. Lawrence, crafted in Canterbury in the early twelfth century,

to a German depiction of the Angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary, from around 1300. On Jan. 2 at noon and 2, the medievalist Sigrid Goldiner will deliver a talk (free with admission) entitled "Radiance and Reflection." (See page 9.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC STRUNG ALONG

Classical music on New Year's Eve usually involves waltzes by some member of the Strauss family. The 92nd Street Y, however, is promoting a different family: the guitar virtuosos of Los Romero, who will bring their high style to music by Torroba, Albéniz,

and Sor. Free champagne at intermission is an added enticement. (See page 10.)

MOVIES LOUIS, LOUIS

Film Society of Lincoln Center begins the year with favorites and rarities by Louis Malle, including his early dramas "The Lovers" and "The Fire Within," the American films "My Dinner with Andre" and "Vanya on 42nd Street," and his documentary series "Phantom India." (See page 14.)

"Art of the Samurai," at the Met. Photograph by Landon Nordeman.



Oh, there are prizes, and then there are prizes! Win this year's Golf Digest U.S. Open Challenge contest and you will achieve the ultimate: a round at Pebble Beach with celebrities before NBC cameras under U.S. Open conditions. Just tell us in 60 words or less how playing in the Golf Digest U.S. Open Challenge would change your life. Feel free to describe your game and what you think you'd

shoot on the U.S. Open setup at Pebble under the most extreme pressure you've ever faced on a golf course. Think of it. You competing where Nicklaus won the 1972 U.S. Open with that amazing 1-iron shot to the 17th; where Watson won the '82 Open with that phenomenal pitch-in on the same hole; where Open champ Kite holed out from behind the seventh green in '92; and where Tiger won by an amazing 15 shots in 2000. Now it's your turn to make your mark at Pebble.

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S P O N S O R E D B Y



THE THEATRE OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

LITTLE GEM

The winner of the Carol Tambor Best of Edinburgh Award, written by Elaine Murphy and directed by Paul Meade, centers on the adventures of three generations of women in Dublin. Previews begin Jan. 5. (Flea, 41 White St. 212-352-3101.)

PRESENT LAUGHTER

Victor Garber stars in Noël Coward's farce, about a British actor preparing for a trip to Africa. Nicholas Martin directs, for the Roundabout Theatre Company. Previews begin Jan. 2. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.)

NOW PLAYING

DO NOT GO GENTLE

In Leon Pownall's thoroughly mellifluous one-man play, which he also directed (realized in this production by Dean Gabourie), Dylan Thomas is the very definition of a troubled soul. "They loved me in America," he says. "Loved me to death." The setting is Purgatory, and the wrinkled, rumped Welsh poet pads about restlessly, drinking as heavily as ever, remembering, raging, reciting passages of his work, and examining his life with an unforgiving self-regard. As Thomas, Geraint Wyn Davies creates a rousing, complex portrait, sometimes bawdy, sometimes tender, always gorgeously spoken. This is an uncommon construction for a one-man play, more impressionistic than narrative. It's a tribute to both playwright and player that the text flows easily be-

loved leaders, the musical's account of Fela has notable omissions, especially regarding his religious and sexual politics. But there are two great things in the show: one is Sahr Ngaujah, the man who, for most of the week, plays Fela. How did the producers find a performer who matched Fela in charm, wit, and insolence? Ngaujah is a thrilling actor, with enough moods and tones and nuances that you have no trouble listening to him for more than two hours straight. The second glory of "Fela!" is the dancing, created by Jones. It's hard to make West African dance look bad, but oh how good Jones and the dancers, more than half of them American-born (the others are African or Caribbean), have made it look. (Reviewed in our issue of 12/7/09.) (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

LET ME DOWN EASY

In the brilliant tracery of her one-woman shows, Anna Deavere Smith listens, watches, records, then acts out both the verbatim testimony and the telltale evasions of each of her many subjects' syntax. Out of this vaudeville of observations—her judgment lies in the juxtaposition—she creates a vivid collaged world. Her newest work (well directed by Leonard Foglia) is an inquiry not into a big public event but into a big spiritual one: how we die. It has a terrific cumulative impact. She looks at everything from wounded machismo (a maimed bull rider, a boxer battered into a four-day coma) to the people who tend those wounds. Smith is doing more than opening up a much needed discussion about the dying and those who minister to them. The purpose of the enterprise, we realize, is for the playwright herself to learn how to die. It's bracing, poetic stuff. (10/19/09) (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422. Through Jan. 3.)

A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

Catherine Zeta-Jones, Angela Lansbury, and Alexander Hanson star in Stephen Sondheim and Hugh Wheeler's musical, based on Ingmar Bergman's "Smiles of a Summer Night," a romantic comedy revolving around the affairs of an actress at a Swedish country house. Trevor Nunn directs. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

MISALLIANCE

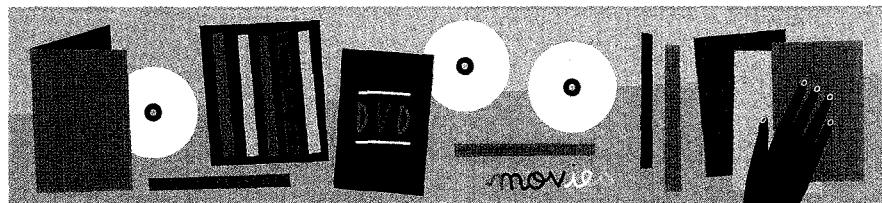
The Pearl Theatre Company, under the new artistic directorship of J. R. Sullivan, revives George Bernard Shaw's 1909 play, about the nutty shenanigans and romantic interminglings among a group of English aristocrats in the course of an afternoon. A plane crash, a broken engagement, and an attempted murder-suicide are among the many bleak events presented with a farcical wink in this social satire of marriage, courtship, and generational conflict. Unsurprisingly, the play—one of Shaw's lesser works—reads somewhat like a museum piece (and uninspired performances don't do it any favors), but for the Shaw enthusiast there are still pleasures to be had in the playwright's wit and terse mastery of plot, albeit in a minor key. (City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

THE ORPHANS' HOME CYCLE: PART 2

"I think of myself as an orphan, belonging to no one but you," Horace Robedaux (Bill Heck) says to his wife, Elizabeth (Maggie Lacey). It is 1917, and the couple, married earlier that year, live in a boarding house full of boisterous neighbors in their home town of Harrison, Texas. They're very happy, but their happiness is hard-won: Horace had a tough, lonely childhood and has been poor all his life; Elizabeth married him for love, alienating her entire family. The second play in Horton Foote's trilogy, which he condensed from nine full-length plays based on the life of his father, is characteristically poignant, funny, and winning, with sensitive direction by Michael Wilson (the artistic director of Hartford Stage, which co-produced with Signature Theatre Company) and a terrific ensemble cast that features the playwright's daughter and muse, Hallie Foote. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-352-3101.)

RACE

Ruthlessness of a rhetorical kind is part of the fun of David Mamet's new play (directed by the author), his latest exercise in contrarian provocation. "Do you know what you can say? To a black man. On the subject of race?" Henry Brown (David Alan Grier), a black lawyer, says to Charles Strickland (Richard Thomas), a rich, white potential client who is accused of raping a black woman. "Nothing," Charles says. "That is correct," Henry replies. Henry's firm has three lawyers—



DVD NOTES BOXING DAY

Late 2009 saw the release of some exceptional DVD boxed sets that deserve mention before the arrival of the new year's crop.

The Soviet director and actor Boris Barnet's warmhearted, clear-eyed comic sensibility is showcased in the 1926 serial "Miss Mend" (Flicker Alley), which he co-directed with Fedor Ozep. Responding to the popularity of American movies in the early Bolshevik era, Barnet and Ozep adapted a 1923 faux-American novel written in Russia and turned its agitprop setup into what is surely one of the earliest movie-referential movies. The story concerns a typist in a cork factory, a single mother, who becomes class-conscious upon seeing the police brutally repress a strike. Meanwhile, three antic journalists (including Barnet) who are sent to cover the strike befriend the heroine, who is rescued from danger by none other than the heir to the firm. When the diabolical Chiche, the head of a vast capitalist conspiracy, plots colossal acts of anti-Soviet terrorism, the cast of characters heads to Leningrad to stop him. The wild complications are set off by references to everything from the Keystone Kops and German Expressionist masterworks to Eisenstein's "Potemkin"; with their whiz-bang gags and over-the-top reversals, Barnet and Ozep send up genre conventions even as they honor them.

Jonathan Nossiter's ten-part documentary series "Mondovino" (Kino), from 2004, treats the world of winemaking as an exemplary battleground in the conflict between globalization and local tradition. Each episode is organized around a single topic, such

as the attempt by California's Mondavi family to make wine in Languedoc, or the worldwide influence of the American wine critic Robert Parker, but the series gets its energy from the extraordinary people Nossiter tracks down on his travels. Though the globalists have their eloquent say, Nossiter's sympathies clearly lie with such traditionalists as the epicurean winemaker Aimé Guibert, whose noble expressions of the philosophy of taste are the movie's moral center.

The wrenching, epic documentary "The Battle of Chile" (Icarus) has an eerily clairvoyant quality. Patricio Guzmán began filming early in 1973, as the right-wing opposition sought to destabilize the government of the Socialist President, Salvador Allende. The movie begins with the threat of civil war, and the climactic episode, the military coup of September 11, 1973, which deposed and killed Allende and brought to power a junta headed by Augusto Pinochet, seems inevitable, even in its most shocking details. Guzmán always seems to know where to be, as he captures not only strikes and protests but a prior, failed coup—at which, horrifically, the cameraman Leonardo Henricksen was shot and killed by a soldier he was filming. The ideological slant of the director's voice-over (the film was completed in Cuba in the late nineteen-seventies) doesn't diminish the elegiac power of his images of a democracy at the edge of the abyss.

—Richard Brody

TIME STANDS STILL

In Donald Margulies's new play, a journalist and a photographer who thrive on their dangerous work are forced by injuries to settle down in New York. Laura Linney, Alicia Silverstone, Brian d'Arcy James, and Eric Bogosian star in the Manhattan Theatre Club production. Daniel Sullivan directs. Previews begin Jan. 5. (Samuel J. Friedman, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE

Liev Schreiber and Scarlett Johansson star in Arthur Miller's drama, directed by Gregory Mosher, about a Brooklyn dockworker who is obsessed with his seventeen-year-old niece. In previews. (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

tween the script and generous passages of Thomas's poems, stories, and letters. On this lovely, ruminative evening, it's all music. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

ERNEST IN LOVE

Charlotte Moore directs a musical adaptation of Oscar Wilde's "The Importance of Being Earnest," with a book and lyrics by Anne Crosswell and music by Lee Pockriss. (Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

FELA!

This musical, directed by Bill T. Jones, tells the life story of Fela Kuti, the father of Afrobeat and, in the nineteen-seventies, one of the most popular musicians in West Africa. Like all after-stories of be-

two of them black—which is the reason that Charles has sought them out. “We have won. By being quick and being brutal. Being fast and first, and tearing off the fucking Band-Aid,” the hard-bitten white partner, Jack Lawson (the expert James Spader), explains to Charles. The lawyers’ rebarbative style happens also to be Mamet’s. Having declared recently, in a piece he wrote for the *Times*, that debates about race are, for the most part, “nothing but sanctimony,” Mamet offers instead nothing but cynicism. In this, he is an equal-opportunity employer. (12/14/09) (Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.)

ROMEO AND JULIET

Nature Theatre of Oklahoma presents this meditation on the Shakespeare play, derived from phone calls to several people who were asked to tell the story of “Romeo and Juliet.” Conceived and directed by Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793, ext. 11.)

THIS

Melissa James Gibson’s play, about neurotic New York thirty-somethings, is less grating than that description might suggest, and far cleverer. The best lines belong, naturally, to Alan (Glenn Fitzgerald), the self-loathing gay best friend (“I have no problem with self-involvement—except in others”), but we are meant to focus on Jane (the alluring Julianne Nicholson), a young, widowed poet who crosses the line with a married friend. The play starts out like a brooding rom-com—imagine a “Friends” episode with a Hamlet complex—but its contemplative streak soon pays off. Gibson has insightful things to say about marriage, grief, and Brita filters; on these subjects and others, the play’s droll wisdom feels hard-won. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Jan. 3.)

Also Playing

AVENUE Q: New World Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200. **BILLY ELLIOT THE MUSICAL:** Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **BRIEF ENCOUNTER:** St. Ann’s Warehouse, 38 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. **BYE BYE BIRDIE:** Henry Miller, 124 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200. **CIRCLE MIRROR TRANSFORMATION:** Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. **THE EMPEROR JONES:** SoHo Playhouse, 15 Vandam St. 212-691-1555. **FINIAN’S RAINBOW:** St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **GOD OF CARNAGE:** Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **HAIR: THE AMERICAN TRIBAL LOVE-ROCK MUSICAL:** Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **IN THE NEXT ROOM OR THE VIBRATOR PLAY:** Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **IRVING BERLIN’S WHITE CHRISTMAS:** Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 3. **THE LION KING:** Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4747. **LOVE, LOSS, AND WHAT I WORE:** Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200. **MEMPHIS:** Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **NEXT TO NORMAL:** Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. **OUR TOWN:** Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St. 212-868-4444. **RAGTIME:** Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100. **ROCK OF AGES:** Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100. **SOUTH PACIFIC:** Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. **SUPERIOR DONUTS:** Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 3. **THE 39 STEPS:** Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. **THE UNDERSTUDY:** Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. **WEST SIDE STORY:** Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 212-239-6200. **WICKED:** Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-239-6200. **WISHFUL DRINKING:** Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300. **ZERO HOUR:** Theatre at St. Clement’s, 423 W. 46th St. 212-279-4200.

NIGHT LIFE ROCK AND POP

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it’s advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

THE BELL HOUSE

149 7th St., between Second and Third Aves., Brooklyn (718-643-6510)—Dec. 31: Obits plays high-

octane angular music and features the guitarist Rick Froberg, famous for his work with the Hot Snakes and Drive Like Jehu. Sharing the bill is the blue-eyed soul singer Eli (Paperboy) Reed.

BLUE NOTE

131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Dec. 31: New Year’s Eve celebrations never end at midnight, and this year one of the finest shows is taking place well after the big moment. The local soul singer **Stephanie McKay** will keep the party going in gritty yet elegant fashion, starting at 1:30 A.M., accompanied by her husband, the saxophonist and composer **Jacques Schwarz-Bart**.

BOWERY BALLROOM

6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Dec. 29-31: In 1971, at New York’s historic St. Mark’s Church, the then unknown **Patti Smith** gave her first public reading, accompanied by the guitarist **Lenny Kaye**. Nearly forty years later, the influential punk poet, who turns sixty-two on Dec. 30, is still performing with Kaye, who plays in her band along with Jay Dee Daugherty, Tony Shanahan, and Patti’s son, Jackson Smith.

FILLMORE NEW YORK AT IRVING PLAZA

17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Dec. 31: New York’s **Fischerspooner** made a flamboyant, colorful splash in the late nineties, in shows that combined the electronic pulse of Reagan-era synth pop and the garish stage theatrics of vintage Bowie. A decade later, the shrick seems a bit played out (especially when countless other groups have plied the same formula more successfully), but the band’s most recent release, “Entertainment,” proves that its knack for catchy electro-ditties remains undiminished.

KNITTING FACTORY

361 Metropolitan Ave., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (347-529-6696)—Dec. 31: It’s hard enough to get the members of a power trio to show up at practice on time. So it’s a wonder that the dozen-piece Afrobeat sensation **Antibalas** can provide the backbone for the Fela Kuti musical “Fela!” and also find the time to participate in thrilling collaborations with other top talent. This summer, Paul Simon made expert use of Antibalas’s stellar horn section in a spot on “Late Night with Jimmy Fallon,” adding those players to Fallon’s house band, the Roots. This New Year’s Eve show concludes the group’s monthlong residency at the new, outer-borough location of this legendary club. Expect them to tear the roof off.

MADISON SQUARE GARDEN

Seventh Ave. at 33rd St. (800-745-3000)—Dec. 31: **Mariah Carey**. The actress and melismatic pop diva has a voice as high as her standing on the *Billboard* charts—she is one of the most successful female recording artists of all time. For this show, she will perform a selection of her hit singles, as well as songs from her new studio album, “Memoirs of an Imperfect Angel.” With a special guest, the hip-hop and R. & B. artist **Trey Songz**.

MAXWELL’S

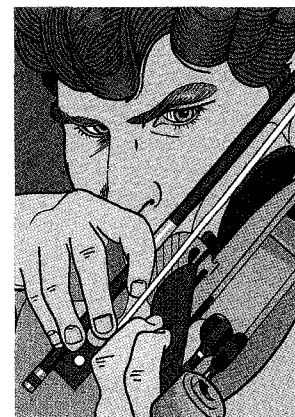
1039 Washington St., Hoboken (201-653-1703)—Dec. 31: **Roky Erickson** was the radical voice of Austin’s 13th Floor Elevators, an influential band known for, among other things, printing the term “Psychedelic Rock” on its business cards, in the mid-sixties. Erickson, who was institutionalized and given a diagnosis of schizophrenia nearly forty years ago, has overcome his personal demons and the demonic behavior of some of his handlers to forge a remarkable solo career. The monsters in his guitar-heavy anthems—be they vampires, zombies, or two-headed dogs—may sound like they come from horror films, but Erickson has his own sources for such things. With Boston’s **Muck & the Mires**, a slightly younger garage-rock outfit.

MERCURY LOUNGE

217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—Dec. 31: The **Detroit Cobras**. Rock-and-roll cover bands walk a fine line between authenticity and illegitimacy, and it doesn’t take much to end up playing by the bathrooms at some all-you-can-eat buffet upstate. But the members of this Motor City five-piece, archivists at heart, have curated a fine selection of obscure soul, garage, and R. & B. singles, digging through crates of 45s in musty Detroit record shops so you don’t have to. Expect them to party like it’s 1962 at this New Year’s Eve show. With the **A-Bones**. Jan. 5: Once the front man of the British shoegaze

CRITIC’S NOTEBOOK LIEBER AUGUSTIN

If a layer of surface noise were added to Augustin Hadelich’s recent solo-violin recording on the Avie label, you might think you were hearing a virtuoso out of the Golden Age. Hadelich, who is twenty-five, has all the fast-fingered brilliance that



modern conservatory culture requires; the musicality and the freewheeling fantasy that he brings to bear, though, cannot be taught. With the pianist **Rohan De Silva**, Hadelich gave a riveting recital at the Frick on Dec. 13, in which he ranged from Beethoven’s Sonata in G Major, Op. 30, No. 3, to showpieces by Sarasate and Ysaÿe, and on to Prokofiev’s Second Sonata and Alfred Schnittke’s First Sonata, from 1963. The crucial thing was the command of color: luminous sweetness in Beethoven and Prokofiev, a wide, ruddy tone in Sarasate’s “Carmen Fantasy,” and savage sounds for Schnittke, including something like electric-guitar fuzz. Hadelich shows similar versatility on the Avie disk, combining classic and modern fare. Here is a young artist with no evident limitations.

—Alex Ross

luminaries Swervedriver, Adam Franklin continues to produce alternative rock with his unfortunately named backing band, the Bolts of Melody, in a similar atmospheric and dreamy vein. Although the project has its high points, ultimately it may be more rewarding to pick up the excellent reissues of the first three Swervedriver LPs, released on Hi-Speed Soul and Second Motion Records.

SOUTHPAW

125 Fifth Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-230-0236)—Jan. 1: Roky Erickson (see Maxwell's). With the *Flestones*, America's great garage band, which started out at CBGB in the seventies and was the subject of the recent documentary "Pardon Us for Living, but the Graveyard Is Full."

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL

59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Jan. 5-16: The pianist Bill Charlap and his mother, the singer Sandy Stewart, are equally devoted to the art of song, as they proved on their bracing 2005 collaborative album, "Love Is Here to Stay." Their new program, "Somebody Loves Me," spotlights tried-and-true classics—familiar, perhaps, but rendered perfectly.

BIRDLAND

315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Dec. 29-30 and Jan. 1-2: With the Cannonball Adderley Legacy project, the drummer Louis Hayes salutes the fervent hard-bop sound of his former boss. Julius Toltentino holds down the essential alto-saxophone position. Dec. 31: Two Birdland regulars—the singer Hilary Kole and the Chico O'Farrill Jazz Orchestra, under the direction of Chico's son Arturo O'Farrill—join forces.

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA

Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Dec. 28-Jan. 3: The Cuban émigré Paquito D'Rivera, here with his ensemble Brazilian Dreams, makes mellifluous sounds with his saxophone and clarinet. D'Rivera and the band once again hook up with the noted vocal quartet New York Voices, with whom they recorded a Latin-themed album, "Brazilian Dreams," in 2002.

EDISON BALLROOM

240 W. 47th St. (212-201-7650)—Dec. 31: Joe Battaglia and the New York Big Band ring in the New Year in high style.

FEINSTEIN'S AT LOEWS REGENCY

540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Dec. 31: A cabaret summit meeting of two champions of great American song, Barbara Cook and Michael Feinstein.

IRIDIUM

1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Dec. 30-Jan. 3: The guitarist Mike Stern welcomes the fusion veterans Randy Brecker, on trumpet, and Dennis Chambers, on drums, as well as the dazzling bassist Victor Wooten, who is on leave from Bela Fleck's Flecktones unit.

JAZZ STANDARD

116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Dec. 29-Jan. 3: New Orleans music is the theme for a sextet featuring the pianist Henry Butler, the trumpeter Sean Jones, the trombonist Wycliffe Gordon, and the saxophonist Donald Harrison, Jr., whose official title back home is Big Chief of the Congo Nation Afro-New Orleans Cultural Group.

ROSE LIVE MUSIC

345 Grand St., Brooklyn (718-599-0069)—Having recently finished a wonderfully titled new album, "Gentlemen, I Neglected to Inform You You Will Not Be Getting Paid" (which comes out Jan. 12), the guitarist Charlie Hunter settles in for a residency on Tuesdays in January. Calling on a feisty brass section and indulging his love of jazz, R. & B., and blues, Hunter has produced an unashamedly groovy album that combines his own snaky virtuosity with sharp songcraft. The drummer Eric Kalb and the trombonist Curtis Fowlkes, both featured on "Gentlemen," will join him here.

VILLAGE VANGUARD

178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Dec. 28-Jan. 3: The *Bad Plus*. Although the trio

added a singer, Wendy Lewis, for their latest album, "For All I Care," the bad boys of jazz will be going it alone for this important year-end engagement. Expect quirky originals and spirited deconstructions of modern pop songs rarely heard within these hallowed walls.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-535-7710)—"Velázquez Rediscovered." Through Feb. 7. ♦ "The 'Young Archer,' Attributed to Michelangelo." Ongoing. ♦ "Art of the Samurai: Japanese Arms and Armor, 1156-1868." Through Jan. 10. ♦ "American Stories: Paintings of Everyday Life, 1765-1915." Through Jan. 24. ♦ "Looking In: Robert Frank's 'The Americans.'" Through Jan. 3. ♦ "Sounding the Pacific: Musical Instruments of Oceania." Through Sept. 6. ♦ "Peaceful Conquerors: Jain Manuscript Painting." Through March 21. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—"Gabriel Orozco." The Mexican sculptor and conceptualist, forty-seven years old, is easily the best artist to have emerged on the global biennial circuit of recent years—a milieu whose chaotic demands for theatrical pizzazz and political virtue have wrecked innumerable promising talents. This show confirms that Orozco is, in fact, the one artist of his ilk and time who stands up to really rigorous scrutiny—incidentally rejuvenating art history as a going concern—and justifies the effort by being delightful. His works aren't invariably beautiful, but they all bespeak beauty as an operating principle: the catch in consciousness when mind and body merge in a state of praise for existence, just as it is. Through March 1. ♦ "Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity." Through Jan. 25. ♦ "Tim Burton." Through April 26. ♦ "Monet's Water Lilies." Through April 12. ♦ "New Photography 2009: Walead Beshty, Daniel Gordon, Leslie Hewitt, Carter Mull, Sterling Ruby, Sara VanDerBeek." Through Jan. 11. ♦ "Performance 7: Mirage by Joan Jonas." Through May 31. ♦ "The New Typography." Through July 12. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—"Kandinsky." Through Jan. 13. ♦ "Anish Kapoor: Memory." Through March 28. (Open Fridays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Saturday evenings until 7:45.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3600)—"Roni Horn aka Roni Horn." Through Jan. 24. ♦ "Georgia O'Keeffe: Abstraction." Through Jan. 17. ♦ "Omer Fast: Nostalgia." Through Feb. 14. ♦ "A Few Frames: Photography and the Contact Sheet." This small, smart show of photographs from the Whitney's collection uses the grid format of the contact sheet as its organizing principle and jumping-off point. A few actual contact sheets (notably Ed Ruscha's test shots for his book "A Few Palm Trees") are part of a lively mix of other stacked and sequential arrangements, by Bernd and Hilla Becher, Francesca Woodman, David Wojnarowicz, and Wallace Berman. Serial imagery by Andy Warhol and Ray K. Metzger is juxtaposed with more cinematic or narrative grids, including frames from Robert Frank's Rolling Stones film, "Cocksucker Blues," Harold Edgerton's four-part image of a bullet shattering a light bulb, and a Collier Schorr collage that suggests the seductive swirl of a daydream. Through Jan. 3. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM

200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—"Who Shot Rock & Roll: A Photographic History, 1955 to the Present." Through Jan. 31. ♦ "James Tissot: 'The Life of Christ.'" Through Jan. 17. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK LOVE AND HAITI

During the nineteen-thirties, the pioneering ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax visited Haiti. Lomax, who was just starting his career, wanted to document the African-influenced music of the Americas, and he recorded roughly fifteen hundred



pieces of music, ranging from vodou chants to work songs to children's rhymes. Now Lomax's work has been brought into the light by a group that includes his daughter, Anna; the historian Gage Averill; and the record producer David Katznelson. The ten-disk set "Alan Lomax in Haiti," designed by Barbara Bersche, includes a map of the country, a paperback book of Lomax's Haitian journals and correspondence, and elaborate liner notes, but what is most important (and most enjoyable) is the music: three hundred songs about politics, sex, poetry, money, religion, and death. At once monumental and intimate, the set is the equal of recent landmark releases such as Dust-to-Digital's gospel box "Goodbye, Babylon" and Revenant's Charley Patton anthology, "Screamin' and Hollerin' the Blues."

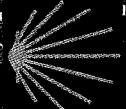
—Ben Greenman

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Pilgrims' Progress: Discoveries Along the Way of Saint James

SPAIN'S FAMED **EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO**, or the Way of Saint James, is not one route, it is many. All culminate in one spectacular and, for many, sacred destination. This year, the route will attract ten million visitors with its Jubilee Year, a twelve-month celebration including hundreds of concerts, art exhibitions, sporting events, theatre, dance, and film programs.

For centuries, Christian pilgrims have made their way across the Spanish border toward the medieval city of **Santiago de Compostela** in northwest Spain. Their ultimate destination was the **Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia**, the gravesite of Saint James. The remains of the first martyred apostle are believed to have been at rest here since the early ninth century. The church is the centerpiece of one of the world's great squares, the **Praza do Obradoiro**, which is also bordered by such historic sites as the fifteenth century **Hospital Real** (now a luxury hotel), the **Palacio de Rajoy**, and the twelfth century **Gelmirez Palace**, one of Spain's great Romanesque buildings.

El Camino de Santiago is one of the most revered and popular pilgrimages in history. A major force for cross-cultural exchange during the medieval period, the World Heritage Site now attracts more than just the devout with such secular pleasures as distinct regional foods like *androlla* sausage and *Arzúa-Ulloa* cheese, historic and vernacular architecture, and the nondenominational salvation of fresh air. Galicia's natural setting of verdant mountains, epic seascapes, and easily traversed lowlands makes adventure travel accessible to all.

Over the centuries, the masses of people crossing through the territory gave rise to new building types, new architectural styles, and a whole range of services created to provide for the basic needs of pilgrims. Simple houses

in a local motif of stacked stone, slate, and tile can still be found, along with golden granite mansions and some of the earliest examples of Romanesque architecture (the style's wide archways were perfectly suited for the great crowds that passed through). The tradition of *albergues de peregrinos* also emerged to give a free night's stay to weary pilgrims. More dependable—and indulgent—accommodations can be found today at *paradors*, historic sites that now operate as luxury hotels. These offer the traveller's trinity of authentic experience, modern convenience, and sumptuous comfort. The Hospital Real is just one example.

Throughout the Camino's Jubilee Year, known locally as **Xacobeo 2010**, travellers of every sort will enjoy a host of

The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia rises over the Praza do Obradoiro. The symbol of El Camino de Santiago is the scallop shell. Like the Camino itself, the ridges of the shell converge on a single point.



cultural events. From **Zubin Mehta** conducting to the **Sónar Festival** of electronic music, photography exhibits commissioned expressly for the Jubilee to the **First International Travel Literature Conference**, the region will once again be the site of a massive migration of searching souls. The Feast of the Apostle itself will be celebrated July 19th through 25th, with a fireworks display over the cathedral on July 24th. More information about the year's seemingly countless events can be found at www.xacobeo.es. Whether you make the trip for absolutely cultural reasons or simply for absolution, it would be a sin to miss this historic celebration.

Visit www.spain.info when planning your next trip to Spain.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—“Traveling the Silk Road: Ancient Pathway to the Modern World.” Through Aug. 15. ♦ “Extreme Mammals: The Biggest, Smallest, and Most Amazing Mammals of All Time.” Through Jan. 3. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

AMERICAN FOLK ART MUSEUM
45 W. 53rd St. (212-265-1040)—“Up Close: Henry Darger and the Coloring Book.” Through Sept. 13. ♦ “Thomas Chambers (1808-1869): American Marine and Landscape Painter.” Through March 7. ♦ “Approaching Abstraction.” Through Sept. 6. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Friday evenings until 7:30.)

BRONX MUSEUM OF THE ARTS
1040 Grand Concourse (718-681-6000)—“Katie Holten.” Through Jan. 3. ♦ “Intersections: The Grand Concourse Commissions.” Through Jan. 3. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, 11 to 6, and Friday evenings until 8.)

THE CLOISTERS
Fort Tryon Park (212-923-3700)—“Christmas-tide at the Cloisters.” Through Jan. 5. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:15.)

FRICK COLLECTION
1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—“Watteau to Degas: French Drawings from the Frits Lugt Collection.” Through Jan. 10. ♦ “Exuberant Grotesques: Renaissance Maiolica from the Fontana Workshop.” Through Jan. 17. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 5.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1133 Sixth Ave., at 43rd St. (212-857-0000)—“Dress Codes: The Third ICP Triennial of Photography and Video.” Through Jan. 17. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6, and Friday evenings until 8.)

JAPAN SOCIETY
333 E. 47th St. (212-832-1155)—“Serizawa: Master of Japanese Textile Design.” Through Jan. 17. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 11 to 6, Fridays, 11 to 9, and weekends, 11 to 5.)

JEWISH MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 92nd St. (212-423-3200)—“Alias Man Ray: The Art of Reinvention.” Through March 14. ♦ “Reinventing Ritual: Contemporary Art and Design for Jewish Life.” Through Feb. 7. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, 11 to 5:45, Thursdays, 11 to 8, and Fridays, 11 to 4.)

MORGAN LIBRARY & MUSEUM
225 Madison Ave., at 36th St. (212-685-0008)—“A Woman's Wit: Jane Austen's Life and Legacy.” Through March 14. ♦ “William Blake's World: 'A New Heaven Is Begun.'” Through Jan. 3. ♦ “Rococo and Revolution: Eighteenth-Century French Drawings.” Through Jan. 3. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10:30 to 5, Fridays, 10:30 to 9, Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

MUSEUM OF ARTS & DESIGN
2 Columbus Circle (212-299-7777)—“Read My Pins: The Madeleine Albright Collection.” Through Jan. 31. ♦ “Slash: Paper Under the Knife.” Through April 4. (Open Wednesdays through Sundays, 11 to 6, and Thursday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 103rd St. (212-534-1672)—“Eero Saarinen: Shaping the Future.” Through Jan. 31. ♦ “Legacy: The Preservation of Wilderness in New York City.” Through March 21. ♦ “Only in New York: Photographs from *Look Magazine*.” Through Jan. 18. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 5.)

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
1 Bowling Green (212-514-3700)—“A Song for the Horse Nation.” Through July 7. (Open daily, 10 to 5, and Thursday evenings until 8.)

NEW MUSEUM
235 Bowery, at Prince St. (212-219-1222)—“Urs Fischer: *Marguerite de Ponty*.” Frail japes by the mildly talented Swiss-born sculptor—the international art world's chief gadfly wit since Maurizio Cattelan faded in the role—are jacked up to epic, flauntingly expensive scale. There are huge aluminum casts of tiny clay lumps (you can tell by the giant thumbprints), walls and a ceiling papered

with photographs of themselves, and big mirrored blocks that bear images of common objects. When a hole in a wall is approached, a realistic tongue sticks out of it. A faux cake is suspended in the air by hidden magnets. It's all nicely diverting—but from what? If you spend more than twenty minutes with the three-floor extravaganza, you're loitering. Through Feb. 7. ♦ “Nikhil Chopra: *Yog Raj Chitrakar, Memory Drawing IX*.” Through Feb. 14. (Open Wednesdays and weekends, noon to 6, and Thursdays and Fridays, noon to 10.)

NEW YORK BOTANICAL GARDEN
Bronx River Parkway at Fordham Rd., the Bronx (718-817-8700)—“Holiday Train Show.” Through Jan. 10. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 10 to 6.)

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER
22-25 Jackson Ave., at 46th Ave., Long Island City (718-784-2084)—“1969.” Through April 5. ♦ “Between Spaces.” Through April 5. ♦ “Robert Bergman: *Selected Portraits*.” Through Jan. 4. (Open Thursdays through Mondays, noon to 6.)

QUEENS MUSEUM OF ART
Flushing Meadows-Corona Park (718-592-9700)—“O Zhang: *Cutting the Blaze to New Frontiers*.” Through March 13. ♦ “Duke Riley: *Those About to Die Salute You*.” Through March 13. ♦ “Daniel Bozhkov: *Republic of Perpetual Reconstitution and Rebuild*.” Through March 13. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and weekends, noon to 5.)

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—“The Red Book of C. G. Jung.” Through Jan. 25. ♦ “Victorious Ones: *Jain Images of Perfection*.” Through Feb. 15. (Open Mondays and Thursdays, 11 to 5, Wednesdays, 11 to 7, Fridays, 11 to 10, and weekends, 11 to 6.)

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM
144 W. 125th St. (212-864-4500)—“30 Seconds Off an Inch.” Through March 14. ♦ “Wardell Milan: *Drawings of Harlem*.” Through March 14. ♦ “A Delicate Touch: *Watercolors from the Permanent Collection*.” Through March 14. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, and Sundays, noon to 6, and Saturdays, 10 to 6.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

JOHN ZINSSER
It's a slight conceit, but a charming one: take a random sampling of New York galleries—from Castelli, in the sixties, to Nosei, in the eighties, to Reena Spaulings, in the aughts—and draw them as islands, in a maplike palette of pink, yellow, and green. Mark with artists' names in lieu of cities', then install on the wall in an archipelago-like cluster. It's said that no man is an island, but some artists are islets: note Jeff Koons, off the northeast coast of Sonnabend. Through Jan. 17. (Graham, 32 E. 67th St. 212-535-5767.)

Short List

PHILIP GUSTON: McKee, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-688-5951. Through Dec. 31. **RAY PARKER:** Washburn, 20 W. 57th St. 212-397-6780. Through Jan. 9. **FRANCIS PICABIA / FAIRFIELD PORTER:** De Nagy, 724 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 212-262-5050. Through Jan. 23. **GERHARD RICHTER:** Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160. Through Jan. 9. **“THE METROPOLIS BETWEEN YOUR EARS”:** James Gallery, CUNY Graduate Center, 365 Fifth Ave., at 34th St. 212-817-7138. Through Jan. 3. **“THE ORIGINS OF EL GRECO: ICON PAINTING IN VENETIAN CRETE”:** Onassis Cultural Center, 645 Fifth Ave., at 51st St. 212-486-4448. Through Feb. 27.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

SYLVIA SLEIGH
Portraits by the nonagenarian British painter, a New Yorker for more than fifty years, appeal mostly

as flashbacks to the art world of the sixties and seventies, when they were made. In the beginning, things look buttoned up. In 1962, Arnold Glimcher, the dynast of Pace, wears a crimson cravat and a natty blazer. In 1963, the grande-dame dealer Betty Parsons glares, steely-eyed, with pearls at her throat, a brooch on her jacket, and her pursed lips the same tomato shade as the Arne Jacobsen womb chair she sits in. By the seventies, that chair is occupied by a slender young man, wearing nothing at all. Through Jan. 9. (I-20, at 557 W. 23rd St. 212-645-1100.)

ALEX WEBB AND REBECCA NORRIS WEBB
This married couple shows color photographs from several trips to Cuba that emphasize the easy compatibility of their distinct visual styles. Alex usually takes a broad view of streetscapes complicated by shadows, reflections, and arrested movement; he has a filmmaker's ability to find the skewed but perfect balance in a scene that threatens to spin out of control. Rebecca tends to focus on details, framing intriguing still-lives and capturing marvellous shots of birds, including a pigeon that appears to be flying away from a freshly laid egg. Both Webbs use color like the Fauves—in hot, vibrant swatches and pungent accents. The results are the opposite of tourist views: pictures that are generated and animated by their subjects, never imposed on them. Through Jan. 2. (Riccio/Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 212-627-4819.)

MICHAEL WOLF / BARBARA CRANE
Chicago is the subject of both these photographers—Wolf focusses on the city itself, in works from 2007, while Crane zeroes in on its people, in a knockout series of Polaroids made in the early eighties. Details of Wolf's large-scale pictures of glowing glass skyscrapers afford us views nearly as intimate as Crane's. By enlarging telephoto shots of people caught unawares in their offices or apartments, he creates grainy portraits that look like stills from surveillance feed. Crane actually gets right up next to the people in her pictures—so close you can practically feel their body heat. Like Mark Cohen and Jessica Craig-Martin, she shows only fragments of her subjects, but she doesn't leave you unsatisfied. Through Jan. 21. (Aperture, 547 W. 27th St. 212-505-5555.)

Short List

WALLACE BERMAN: Klagsbrun, 526 W. 26th St. 212-243-3335. Through Jan. 9. **BRIAN CALVIN:** Kern, 532 W. 20th St. 212-367-9663. Through Jan. 16. **ROZ CHAST:** Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410. Through Jan. 9. **RICHARD HAWKINS:** Greene Naftali, 508 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770. Through Jan. 23. **SHARON LOCKHART:** Gladstone, 515 W. 24th St. 212-206-9300. Through Jan. 30. **“THE BRUCE HIGH QUALITY FOUNDATION UNIVERSITY”:** Inglett, 522 W. 24th St. 212-647-9111. Through Jan. 23. **“IN NUMBERS: SERIAL PUBLICATIONS BY ARTISTS SINCE 1955”:** X Initiative, 548 W. 22nd St. 917-697-4886. Through Jan. 30. **“MORPHOLOGICAL MUTINY”:** Nolan, 527 W. 29th St. 212-925-6190. Through Jan. 23.

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

“BANDE A PART”

This energetic group show on the New York underground overlaps nicely with the great exhibition of rock-and-roll photographers at the Brooklyn Museum, but the subject here is broader—Patti Smith, Joey Ramone, and Iggy Pop are joined by a whole other crew of party people. Here, inevitably, are Andy Warhol, Edie Sedgwick, Candy Darling, and Lou Reed, most of them shot by the Factory regular Billy Name. Also in this cast of characters: William Burroughs (whom Marcia Resnick caught at dinner with Warhol and Mick Jagger), Jean-Michel Basquiat (photographed by Bobby Grossman in front of early Samo graffiti), and a group of anonymous teen hustlers (by Danny Fields, who also contributed a classic Rolling Stones collage). Through Jan. 17. (Clic, 424 Broome St. 212-219-9308.)

"FROTTAGE"

The gem of this exhibition, inspired by a fusty Surrealist technique (cover a surface with paper and rub with pencil), is its catalogue, conceived by the curator Alex Kitnick—a subversive whisper of a booklet, printed in silver ink. Frottage was popularized by Max Ernst (1891-1976), so it's no big surprise that he wins best in show: inspecting plates from his portfolio "Histoire Naturelle" is like cloud-gazing. (Look, a rhinoceros!) The Belgian poet-artist Henri Michaux (1899-1984) runs a close second, with secretive little drawings, the best made by caressing bedsheets with graphite upon waking. The contemporary artists here include Sam Lewitt, whose cockamamie diagram linking Iceland, De Beers diamonds, and ancient Chinese coins adds a welcome jolt of color (canary), and Melanie Gilligan, whose grid derived from lava-tory tiles is a bit of bathroom humor of which Ernst would surely approve. Through Jan. 17. (Abreu, 36 Orchard St. 212-995-1774.)

Short List

DAVID BROOKS: Museum 52, at 4 E. 2nd St. 347-789-7072. Through Jan. 16. **MATTHIAS DORN-FELD / VIRGINIA POUNDSTONE:** Harris Lieberman, 89 Vandam St. 212-206-1290. Through Jan. 16. **VOLKER HUELLER:** Eleven Rivington, 11 Rivington St. 212-982-1930. Through Jan. 8. **JO-ANNA MALINOWSKA:** Canada, 55 Chrystie St. 212-925-4631. Through Jan. 24. **WARDELL MILAN:** Taxter & Spengemann, 123 E. 12th St. 212-924-0212. Through Jan. 23. **SPENCER SWEENEY:** Brown, 620 Greenwich St. 212-627-5258. Through Jan. 16. **"ALMOST":** Beauchene, 21 Orchard St. 212-375-8043. Through Jan. 17. **"SKULTURE":** Feature, 131 Allen St. 212-675-7772. Through Jan. 23.

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET

As the "Nutcracker" season winds down, the repertory season begins. Leading into a week of Balanchine's glorious "Midsummer Night's Dream," the first of several full-evening story ballets, the company presents a program called "Tradition and Innovation." Peter Martins's newest, but certainly not his most original, ensemble piece, "Naïve and Sentimental Music," is his ninth ballet set to the music of John Adams. It will join Balanchine's 1970 tribute to Gershwin, "Who Cares?," which is set to such standards as "I Got Rhythm" and "'S Wonderful" and builds to a razzle-dazzle finish. ♦ Dec. 29 at 6, Dec. 30 at 2 and 6, Dec. 31 at 3, Jan. 2 at 2 and 8, and Jan. 3 at 1: "The Nutcracker." ♦ Jan. 5 at 7:30: "Naïve and Sentimental Music" and "Who Cares?" (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500. Through Feb. 28.)

ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE

The concluding week of the annual Ailey encampment at City Center offers a few more chances to catch the magnificent dancers in this year's premières: Matthew Rushing's first work, the didactic Harlem Renaissance pageant "Uptown"; what Judith Jamison says is her last piece, "Among Us"; and Ronald K. Brown's tribute to Jamison, "Dancing Spirit." It's also a week for compilations: an anniversary sampler of Jamison commissions, a best-of primer of Ailey choreography, and, on Sunday night, a seasonal roundup followed by one last performance of "Revelations." (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Dec. 29 and Dec. 31 at 7, Dec. 30 and Jan. 1 at 8, Jan. 2 at 2 and 8, and Jan. 3 at 3 and 7:30.)

"RASTA THOMAS' ROCK THE BALLET"

The Bad Boys of Dance present this show, the brainchild of the onetime classical dancer and "Movin' Out" star Rasta Thomas and his wife, Adrienne Canterna-Thomas. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 29 at 7:30, Dec. 30 and Jan. 3 at 2 and 7:30, Dec. 31 at 5, and Jan. 2 at 2 and 8.)

SOLEDAD BARRIO & NOCHE FLAMENCA

Although the company is from Spain, you'd be hard pressed to find a flamenco aficionado in this

city who doesn't embrace the troupe, season after season, as a home-town favorite. Perhaps it's in gratitude, then, that Martin Santangelo, the artistic director, offers a new piece honoring the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a group of Americans who fought against Franco in the Spanish Civil War. Santangelo's choreographic efforts tend to be slight, as if he understood that the essential gift is not novelty but, rather, the musicians, the dance solos of Antonio Jimenez and Juan Ogalla, and, above all, the *siguiriya* and *soleá* of the incomparable Soledad Barrio. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200. Dec. 29-30 at 8, Dec. 31 and Jan. 2 at 5 and 8, and Jan. 3 at 5. Through Jan. 16.)

PACIFIC NORTHWEST BALLET

The Seattle-based company's début at the Joyce is also a homecoming: its young artistic director, Peter Boal, and two of his top dancers, Carla Körbes and Seth Orza, are former, well-loved New York City Ballet members. Boal, in particular, was a star, a classicist of the utmost purity and intelligence until he retired, in 2005. Since he took the reins at P.N.B., later that year, the company has thrived; now it's here to show its stuff, in dances that include two Boal commissions: "Opus 111," a piece by Twyla Tharp set to a Brahms quintet, and "3 Movements," a large ensemble work by the seemingly ubiquitous Benjamin Millepied. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Jan. 5 at 7:30. Through Jan. 10.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA

The Met's revival of Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel" proves that Richard Jones's outlandish, food-obsessed staging promises to become a house favorite. Jones's ghoulish fantasy world is convincingly inhabited by equally eccentric characters: Angelika Kirchschlager and Miah Persson as the enchanting, badly behaved siblings, Rosalind Plowright as their pill-popping mother, Dwayne Croft as their flawed yet charismatic father, and, best of all, Philip Langridge in a masterly turn as the Witch, a bizarro-world Julia Child who whips up dangerous delights for the children in her jumbo cooking-show kitchen. Fabio Luisi conducts the opera as if it were a Wagner miniature, making a tiny epic of the children's plight. (Dec. 30 at 11 A.M. and Jan. 2 at 1. These are the final performances.) ♦ Making a supreme effort, the young Maltese tenor Joseph Calleja brings not only his honeyed voice to the title role of "Les Contes d'Hoffmann" but also a genuine willingness to meet the demands of Bartlett Sher's complex and colorful new staging. (It's a big improvement over Otto Schenk's stolid production from 1982.) Anna Netrebko, as Antonia, is easily the finest of Hoffmann's three imaginary lovers; Kate Lindsey is a sleek and evasive Nicklausse; and Alan Held sings the roles of the four villains with unflinching authority (and intelligible French diction). The majesty and fire of James Levine's conducting make one forget the posthumous patch-ups made to Offenbach's incomplete score. (John Keenan conducts the first performance this week.) (Dec. 30 and Jan. 2 at 8. These are the final performances.) ♦ With successful new productions of "Hoffmann" and "From the House of the Dead" under the Met's belt, the fiasco that was the opening-night "Tosca" is becoming a distant memory. Next up is a new production of "Carmen" by the distinguished British director Richard Eyre, whose Broadway and film work has made him familiar to New York audiences. (It's high time: the Zeffirelli production has long been an embarrassment.) The company is lavishing talent on the première run; the first performances feature Elina Garanča (in the title role), Barbara Frittoli, Roberto Alagna, and Mariusz Kwiecien, conducted by the dynamic young Canadian maestro Yannick Nézet-Séguin. (Dec. 31 at 6:30 and Jan. 5 at 8.) ♦ Edo de Waart, replacing James Levine, conducts the January performances of

"Der Rosenkavalier." The cast—which includes Renée Fleming, Susan Graham, Christine Schäfer, and Kristinn Sigmundsson—could hardly be bettered. (Jan. 1 at 7:30.) ♦ Another house favorite, the spectacular Zeffirelli production of "Turandot," returns, with Maria Guleghina, Maija Kovalevska, Salvatore Licitra, and Hao Jiang Tan; Andris Nelsons. (Jan. 4 at 8.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

There's not an ounce of Strauss in the orchestra's year-end concert. Instead, Alan Gilbert will conduct a festive program starring the Philharmonic's artist-in-residence, the baritone Thomas Hampson, that features much Copland (the "Appalachian Spring" Suite and several of the "Old American Songs") as well as Gershwin's "An American in Paris" and a clutch of favorite Broadway tunes. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Dec. 31 at 7:30.)

"CANTATAS IN CONTEXT" SERIES

The second of three winter concerts—a collaborative series offered by the Orchestra of St. Luke's and Mary Greer's New York Baroque Soloists chorus—is a mixture of sacred and secular music for New Year's Eve, all of it by Bach. The program features the Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, the Orchestral Suite No. 3, and the Concerto for Oboe and Violin in C Minor, in addition to the jubilant cantata "Jauchzet Gott in Allen Landen!" (with the soprano Ilana Davidson). (Park Avenue Christian Church, Park Ave. at 85th St. www.smarttix.com. Dec. 31 at 8.)

"GREEN MOUNTAIN PROJECT":

MONTEVERDI'S VESPERS OF 1610

No, they're not from Vermont. "Green mountain" is, roughly, the English translation of the name of Italy's *gran maestro* of the early Baroque, whose greatest choral work was published four hundred years ago. Scott Metcalfe, from the concertmaster's chair, leads an ensemble of twenty-five singers and players (including the soprano Jolle Greenleaf and the tenor Marc Molomot), who offer a period-instrument performance at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, near Times Square. (145 W. 46th St. Jan. 3 at 7. A donation is suggested.)

RECITALS

BARGEMUSIC

Dec. 31 at 7:30: The floating chamber-music series says goodbye to 2009 with one of those occasional concerts which stretch the barge's cozy space to its limits. New Year's Eve is all-Bach, with an ensemble of some of New York's finest musicians (including the violinists Mark Peskanov and Tom Chiu, the cellists Edward Arron and Nicholas Tsavaras, and the flutist Sofia Anastasia) performing the Concerto for Violin and Oboe and the Brandenburg Concertos 2-6. Complimentary cookies (and a glass of champagne) sweeten the deal. ♦ Jan. 2 at 8 and Jan. 3 at 3: Across two concerts, the pianist Nicolas Sivelöv surveys the twenty-four preludes and fugues of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

LOS ROMERO

The first family of classical guitar—featuring Pepe, Celin, Celino, and Lito Romero—offers a Spanish New Year's Eve concert at the 92nd Street Y that features works by Torroba, Sor, Albéniz, and Pepe and Celedonio Romero; complimentary champagne will be offered at intermission. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 31 at 8.)

(LE) POISSON ROUGE

Two formidable African-American musicians take the stage this week. Jan. 3 at 7: In "Two Sides of Don Byron," the compelling avant-garde jazz composer (and master of the clarinet and the saxophone) reveals the full range of his creativity. Lisa

Moore performs the composer's solo-piano work "Seven," followed by a jazz set offered by the Don Byron Quartet. ♦ Jan. 5 at 7:30: The Metropolitan Opera bass Eric Owens dips into another aspect of his talent by offering a show of standards from the American Songbook by Berlin, Porter, Gershwin, Kern, and Rodgers and Hart, accompanied by the Randy Ingram Trio. (158 Bleecker St. www.lprnyc.com.)

JUPITER SYMPHONY CHAMBER PLAYERS

Frank Morelli, one of the city's premier bassoonists, dominates Jupiter's first concert of the year in a perky program (also featuring the violist Cynthia Phelps and the cellist Joshua Roman, among others) that includes music for his instrument by Mozart, Weber (the Andante and Hungarian Rondo), Giardini, and Janáček (the Concertino, with the pianist Einav Yarden). Dvořák's warm-hearted String Quartet No. 12 ("American") completes the bill. (Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church, 152 W. 66th St. 212-799-1259. Jan. 4 at 2 and 7:30.)

MOVIES OPENING

CASE 39

Renée Zellweger stars in this thriller as a social worker who attempts to rescue a child (Jodelle Ferland) from abusive parents. Directed by Christian Alvart. Opening Jan. 1. (In wide release.)

THE CHASER

Na Hong-Jin directed this drama, from South Korea, about a policeman who becomes a pimp and confronts the serial killer who targets his prostitutes. In Korean. Opening Dec. 30. (IFC Center.)

A FILM WITH ME IN IT

In this comedy, from Ireland, Mark Doherty stars as a failed actor who attempts to reimagine his problems as a screenplay. Directed by Ian Fitzgibbon. Opening Jan. 1. (IFC Center.)

THE LOSS OF A TEARDROP DIAMOND

A drama, directed by Jodie Markell from a screenplay by Tennessee Williams, about a rebellious heirless (Bryce Dallas Howard) who begins a relationship with a poor man (Chris Evans). Opening Dec. 30. (In limited release.)

THE WHITE RIBBON

Reviewed below in Now Playing. Opening Dec. 30. (In limited release.)

NOW PLAYING

BAD LIEUTENANT: PORT OF CALL NEW ORLEANS

Snakes, in their sinister side-to-side way, swim through floodwaters, menacing a man held in an underground jail; alligators climb onto the freeway, causing automobiles to smash into one another; iguanas lounge on coffee tables, turning their loathsome eyes on the humans standing around them. In brief, Werner Herzog has checked into New Orleans and metaphysical despair is loosed upon Bourbon Street. It's a police procedural, sort of. A local drug kingpin is killing African-born interlopers in the white-powder trade; Detective Terence McDonagh (Nicolas Cage) tries to stop him while grabbing as much cocaine for himself as he can. Cage, his face screwed up with rage, one shoulder hitched higher than the other from a back injury, looks like Quasimodo without a bell rope to hang on to. Herzog has no interest in telling a story straight, and he lets his star run wild. The result is a mess, but it's far from

boring. With Eva Mendes and Val Kilmer, who seem to be in another picture. Loosely based on Abel Ferrara's "Bad Lieutenant," from 1992, which Herzog denies ever having seen.—David Denby (Reviewed in our issue of 11/30/09.) (In wide release.)

THE BLIND SIDE

The director and screenwriter John Lee Hancock's adaptation of Michael Lewis's nonfiction book is a multimillion-dollar cheeseburger—hard to resist, savory, comforting, and fundamentally unwholesome. The story, which takes place in Memphis, Tennessee, concerns the transformation of Michael Oher, a black teen-ager whose mother was a crack addict, from a street kid to an All-American college football player, thanks to the intervention of the wealthy white Tuohy family. Sandra Bullock gleefully tears into the role of Leigh Anne Tuohy, the fierce, salty, flamboyant young matriarch who takes Michael into her home and her family and becomes both his protector and his mentor, and Quintin Aaron brings a calm grace to the role of Michael. The movie is done with crispness, vigor, down-home humor, and an over-all tang of good feeling, but the pushing of buttons is extraordinarily calculated. Hancock's extremely selective view of Southern life offers a vision of anti-racism devoid of liberalism and presents young Michael as a living tabula rasa on which to project Tuohy-family values.—Richard Brody (In wide release.)

BROKEN EMBRACES

The new Pedro Almodóvar film is a complicated business, with stories built inside one another and subplots leading off in furtive directions, like tunnels. We meet Harry Caine (Lluís Homar), a blind screenwriter and former director, who, when he is not undressing strangers in his apartment, is concocting screenplays with his assistant, Diego (Tamar Novas), or revisiting and recutting a movie that was taken out of his hands many years before. Much of



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the action is set in that time—the chronicle of a love affair between the director and his star (Penélope Cruz), the mistress of a jealous financier (José Luis Gómez). The two periods intersect, as so often in Almodóvar, via parents and children; Diego's mother and the financier's pushy son, it turns out, both have a substantial role to play. The clarity and sheen of the film are typically startling, and no living director is more expert in the weaving of matching details; this time, however, the lusts and disappointments of the characters come close to being smothered—and rendered strangely unmoving—by the surfeit of cleverness and cool. In Spanish.—*Anthony Lane* (11/23/09) (In wide release.)

BROTHERS

The new home-from-the-war movie, written by David Benioff and directed by Jim Sheridan, has been made with great devotion and sincerity, but nothing in it quite works. Sam Shepard is the dominating alcoholic father, a former marine who has tormented his two sons, turning one, Sam (Tobey Maguire), into a perfect high-achiever, both athlete and war hero, dutifully serving multiple tours in Afghanistan; and the other, Tommy (Jake Gyllenhaal), into a resentful, alcoholic, unemployable mess. When Sam gets captured by the Taliban, his wife, Grace (Natalie Portman), believing he's dead, leans

CRAZY HEART

Jeff Bridges is Bad Blake, a well-travelled country singer and a barely functioning mess with a ratty beard and ponytail, a large belly, and a constant cigarette and glass of bourbon. He drives alone through vast stretches of the Southwest, drifting from saloon to bowling alley, performing with ragged pickup bands. He can still sing and play, a little, though he may not make it through a set without heaving in an alley. The rest of the time he lies on his back in a squalid motel. Bridges luxuriates in indolence, though, unlike the sublime Dude in "The Big Lebowski," Bad is not pleased with himself; there's an irritable pride churning around inside the man. Maggie Gyllenhaal, ardent and looking great, turns up as Jean Craddock, an arts journalist and single mother who penetrates the gloom of Bad's motel room for an interview. Jean wakes up the decrepit singer, but this is not a movie about miracles (the general theme of Bad's songs is "Everything is screwed up, but nothing can be done about it"). Nor is the movie quite a miracle itself. It has an easy, unforced rhythm, yet it needs more plot, more complication, more conflict. Written and directed by Scott Cooper, from Thomas Cobb's novel.—*D.D.* (12/14/09) (In limited release.)

TABLES FOR TWO SUSHI UO



151 Rivington St. (212-677-5470)—It takes guts to open a serious sushi restaurant in a bad economy, all the more so if you're not Japanese and are only twenty-three years old. But David Bouhadana, who grew up in Florida, of French and Moroccan parentage, clearly has plenty of ambition, as well as an appealing personality and considerable flair with a sushi knife. During the past five years, he has apprenticed with various sushi masters in the States and in Japan. Sushi Uo, his first restaurant, is a tiny operation, just a small sushi bar and a dozen tables, up an unmarked flight of stairs on the Lower East Side.

The menu features both traditional sushi and more inflected dishes, some of which don't avoid the vagaries of Asian fusion. Salmon skin—rich, fatty, cooked almost to the consistency of pork rind—worked quite well with wasabi gnocchi, though without convincing you that Italian and Japanese cuisines ought to get together more often. (On another night, the skin made a satisfying combination with a salad of arugula, apple, and pine nuts.) One inventive dish is a so-called tartare, consisting of edamame chopped with shiso and citrus. The preparation foregrounds the beans' nutty flavor, and is an antidote to all the edamame that one has sucked from salty pods without ever really tasting. Ultimately, though, you sense that unadulterated sushi is Bouhadana's real interest. His restaurant doesn't provide the almost intimidating flaw-

lessness of the best midtown sushi temples, but its food's quality is consistently higher than that of almost any comparably priced establishment and far removed from that of ordinary neighborhood joints, with their cloudy hunks of tuna and cardboardlike eel. Here, tuna is a brilliant, clear red, like stained glass, and eel is soft and pliant. Bouhadana makes subtle tastes register—like the Japanese citron that he zests in microscopic quantities over live scallops—and his presentation is deft: the body of a mackerel, its meat filleted into neat rectangles, is bent back with a bamboo skewer, as if turning in the water.

Barking out instructions in Japanese, Bouhadana works with just one sushi assistant and one cook. This probably helps keep prices down, though when the restaurant is full you fear for his sanity, and his fingers. On calmer nights, he holds court for whoever is at the sushi bar, explaining the difficulties of sourcing ingredients, or why he finds mackerel more interesting than tuna belly, or why, when preparing live orange clams, one must not only cut them into strips but fling each piece down dramatically on the counter, where it visibly recoils on impact. Apparently, the jolt causes the muscle fibres, still alive, to tense, giving the clam a new texture, sinewy and strange. (Open Mondays through Saturdays for dinner. Dishes \$4-\$15.50; sushi \$3-\$46.)

—*Leo Carey*

toward Tommy, who pulls himself together and helps her raise her two kids. Then Sam returns. The script feels mechanical and obvious, and, except for Gyllenhaal, the movie is disastrously miscast. Maguire's Sam is humorless and odd-looking in his high-and-tight military haircut even before he goes away, and Portman, an elfin, improbably pretty thing, is unconvincing as a former cheerleader and young mother of two; they don't set off the dimmest of sparks in each other. You wait for Maguire to blow, and blow he does, shrieking and smashing things, in a display that seems more like pyrotechnics than acting.—*D.D.* (12/14/09) (In wide release.)

EASY LIVING

One of the most pleasurable of the romantic slapstick comedies of the thirties, and full of surprises. Jean Arthur is the working girl whose life is completely changed when a sable coat, thrown out a millionaire's window, lands on her head. The movie is a wonderful fluke: the script, by Preston Sturges, is in his manic, everybody-with-something-to-say style; the director, Mitchell Leisen (once De Mille's art director), tempered it with smooth takes and elegant clothes and sets, including a lily-shaped bathtub. The film has impish, sweet moments (such as the half-asleep heroine's delayed reaction after a kiss from the hero—Ray Milland) and at

least one classic slapstick sequence (the little glass doors in an Automat fly open and people lunge for the free food). With Edward Arnold (a little louder than necessary—that was always his vice), and Mary Nash, William Demarest, Luis Alberni, Franklin Pangborn, and Esther Dale. Released in 1937.—*Pauline Kael* (Film Forum; Jan. 3.)

FANTASTIC MR. FOX

For his stop-motion adaptation of Roald Dahl's book—about a fox who steals from three grotesque farmers, who go to absurd lengths to capture him as he leads his family and friends on increasingly desperate adventures in order to survive—the director Wes Anderson, co-writing the script with Noah Baumbach, greatly amplified the story and its emotional spectrum. Mr. and Mrs. Fox (voiced by George Clooney and Meryl Streep)—he's a journalist, she's an artist—bring to life a view of marriage that's as bittersweet and insightful as that of any recent live-action movie, and their idiosyncratic son (Jason Schwartzman) is set up in a touching rivalry with his cousin (Eric Anderson, the director's brother). Visually, the movie is a wonder, with its profusion of detail and exquisitely focussed "performances" by the figurines, whom Anderson frames in images as precisely composed as those featuring actors in his live-action work. The voice performances are sparkling and apt; the adventure plot is realized with a scenographic splendor that's as understated as it is dazzling, and is also invested with a surprising moral weight. Though the emotional realms—and the philosophical twists—that Anderson evokes are unusually sophisticated for a children's film, its exuberance is a universal tonic.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

THE IMAGINARIUM OF DR. PARNASSUS

A travelling theatre rolls through modern London, inviting citizens to step up and share in its wonders; nobody orchestrates a blast from the past quite like Terry Gilliam. His new film stars Christopher Plummer as the eponymous doctor, who claims immortality and has entered into a pact with the Devil (Tom Waits), although, as often with Gilliam, the fine print of the story feels elusive. Parnassus is both Faust and Prospero—he even has a half-obedient, adoring daughter (Lily Cole), plus a diminutive sprite (Verne Troyer), to complete the picture. The film makes the least impact when it aims for maximum strangeness (the dreamworlds into which the theatre's customers are plunged are no more than the fruits of a wandering fancy), whereas its everyday setting, beside the Thames, has a sad, valedictory grit that is hard to shake off. With Johnny Depp, Colin Farrell, Jude Law, and the late Heath Ledger, all in the same role, as a ponytailed charmer in a white suit.—*A.L.* (12/21 & 28/09) (In wide release.)

INVICTUS

Clint Eastwood's stirring tribute to Nelson Mandela's moral grandeur and practical wisdom carries a whiff of the official—but the importance of this sort of virtuous public spectacle is itself the subject of the movie. The drama concerns Mandela's embrace, in 1995—soon after his election as South Africa's first post-apartheid President—of the country's rugby team (generally loved by whites and hated by blacks) when the country hosted the sport's World Cup tournament. Morgan Freeman brings a sublime dignity and self-mastery to the role of Mandela. As Francois Pienaar, the team captain to whom Mandela reaches out, Matt Damon lends good-humored smarts to the athlete's quiet rise to enlightenment. Eastwood's view of South Africa is sketchy but warm-hearted and filled with fine-grained details. We mostly see Mandela at work, exerting power gracefully and compassionately, and there are no intimate revelations and no ambiguities or ironies. Rather, the movie takes its place in Eastwood's rigorous series of latter-day reflections on democratic values—here, the republic rests on the shoulders of a virtuous leader who understands the power of political symbolism and senses that a country unites not around its ideas but around its images. As such, it's also a defense of Eastwood's own popular artistry—and of the system that sustains it.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

IT'S COMPLICATED

Is Nancy Meyers ("Something's Gotta Give") the squarest person ever to make a movie? This new embarrassment helps make the case. Meryl Streep, reduced to giggling, fumbling, gossipy ordinariness

JESSIE WENDER



"The Loss of a Teardrop Diamond," written by Tennessee Williams, opens Dec. 30.

for the first time in her career, is a wealthy divorcee with a bakery in Santa Monica and a big house in Malibu that, for some reason, isn't big enough. She wants to build an addition with a large kitchen (even though half the movie takes place in her existing kitchen, which is large enough to yield endless meals and seat eight). She has an affair with the husband who left her ten years earlier, played by Alec Baldwin, who comes off as hyperaggressive, dull, wet, and fat. At the same time, Streep flirts with her architect, played all milquetoasty by Steve Martin. The characters are upper-middle-class people who act like TV's lower-middle-class people. There are many scenes devoted to the extraordinary news that sixty-year-olds actually do it. The dialogue is redundant, the direction coarse and obvious. John Krasinski, mugging creatively as Streep's prospective son-in-law, is the only one in the movie operating with professional skill.—D.D. (In wide release.)

THE LAST STATION

Christopher Plummer is Leo Tolstoy in his eighties, imposing, stentorian, and almost alarmingly active; Helen Mirren, letting her age show yet still the most sexual actress on the screen, is Sofya, Tolstoy's wife of forty-eight years. The movie is raised to the level of greatness by its two acting demons, who go at each other full tilt and produce scenes of Shakespearean affection, chagrin, and rage. Shall Tolstoy leave the copyright and the enormous profits from his worldly masterpieces to Sofya and their children? Or shall he leave them to the "Russian people," as administered by the organization that propagates his late-in-life obsessions—a cultish neo-Christian, neo-socialist religion with its communes and schools, its advocacy of passive resistance to violence? The entire movie cries out that exalted, self-denying spirituality, however noble, is less sane than everyday love and sex and the full adoration of the sensuous world. With Paul Giamatti (overacting), as Chertkov, Tolstoy's fanatical disciple and administrator; and James McAvoy, whose vows of celibacy are no match for the flirtatious and intelligent fellow-Tolstoyan, Masha (Kerry Condon), who climbs into his bed. The exteriors were shot in a fine old house in Germany that resembles Yasnaya Polyana, Tol-

stoy's estate. Michael Hoffman adapted Jay Parini's 1990 novel and directed with power and fluidity.—D.D. (12/14/09) (In limited release.)

THE LOVELY BONES

In the movie, as in Alice Sebold's 2002 best-seller, Susie (Saoirse Ronan), a fourteen-year-old girl, narrates, from Heaven or wherever it is, her own murder in 1973 at the hands of a neighborhood creep (Stanley Tucci); then she observes her father (Mark Wahlberg), mother (Rachel Weisz), and sister (Rose McIver) as they miserably cope with her death. But, in Peter Jackson's adaptation, she is not merely present in their minds; she is there, prompting, warning, claiming a kiss from her handsome teen boyfriend. The book was brought off with considerable delicacy—it's really a detailed portrait of a suburban girl's life in the seventies. Literalized in the movie, the material is closer to a high-toned ghost story. Jackson intermingles family goings on with Susie's gossamer interventions, and some of the brushed-with-ether imagery comes close to the uncanny, but a lot of it is fussy-baroque, redundant, and undramatic. Jackson's Heaven has luscious hills and dales, gleaming lakes, and fields of waving grain. The picture has been fashioned as a holiday family entertainment about a grisly murder and grief, and it's more than a little sickening. Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens worked with Jackson on the screenplay. With Michael Imperioli.—D.D. (12/14/09) (In wide release.)

ME AND ORSON WELLES

A vivid view of Orson Welles (Christian McKay) at twenty-two, as seen through the eyes of a cocky teenager (Zac Efron) from New Jersey who bluffs his way into Welles's Mercury Theatre group in 1937. The plot is conventional: the young man gets initiated into sex and the many other complicated rites of the grownup world—that is, he gets warmed up and then burned by people more experienced and ruthless than he is. But the details of the production that Welles stages (a modern-dress "Julius Caesar") are fascinating, and at the center of it stands the seductive and bombastic young genius, who applies his superlative theatrical instincts to an old classic. The British actor McKay has the necessary stature and vaunting authority, an easy way with a cigar, a sly smile, and a strong voice. "I am Orson Welles!"

he thunders, when challenged. "I own the store." The picture has great spirit and considerable charm. It's about the giddiness of promise—the awakening of young talents to a moment when anything seems possible. With Claire Danes as Welles's friendly but opportunistic secretary. Directed by Richard Linklater.—D.D. (11/30/09) (In wide release.)

THE MESSENGER

Captain Tony Stone (Woody Harrelson), an Army lifer with a shaved head and a jaw like a stone jetty, and Staff Sergeant Will Montgomery (Ben Foster), a coiled, secretive Iraq-war hero, work together at what is surely the worst job in the armed forces: telling parents and spouses that a loved one has been killed in Iraq. There's an excruciatingly obvious but unavoidable irony here: the movie itself has taken on the unwelcome task of telling its audience what it doesn't want to hear—news of the way families get hit by an unending war. Yet it doesn't feel dutiful or solemn. This is a fully felt, morally alert, marvellously acted piece of work. Harrelson, with his eye-popping glare and acetylene voice, takes his usual wild-man character deep into melancholy and loneliness; the mesmerizing Foster, whose eyes seem to look inward and outward at the same time, eases the tense, guilty war hero back into life. The two form an uneasy, caressing friendship. The visits to the families are done with great delicacy, but great courage, too, and after a while we feel not like voyeurs but like participants. With a droopy, passive Samantha Morton—the movie's only weakness—as a widow whom the sergeant falls in love with. The director, Oren Moverman (a veteran of the Israeli Army), is clearly a whiz with actors.—D.D. (11/16/09) (In wide release.)

MY SON, MY SON, WHAT HAVE YE DONE

The unholy creative marriage of David Lynch (as executive producer) and Werner Herzog (as director and co-writer, along with Herbert Goldner) brings forth a strange, hypnotic film—based on a true story—about a disturbed man (Michael Shannon) who kills his mother (the great Grace Zabriskie) with a sword, takes hostages, and barricades himself and them inside his home. After the cops arrive, the story is studded with flashbacks as various characters recall the events that lead up to the murder. The plot jams ostrich farms, Peruvian jungles, a staging of Sophocles' *Orestes*, and lots of other bits of business into the film's brisk running time, yet the proceedings, aided by the ominous music and the actors' dreamy line readings, have a stillness that is queasily involving. Herzog packs the film with arresting, almost surrealistic images (a rolling can of instant oatmeal, a quivering mass of black jello) that give the movie an unnerving sense of the banal.—Bruce Diones (In limited release.)

NINE

Given how hard it is to get movies off the ground, why are so many adapted from works that cry out *not* to be made into movies in the first place? Just as it was easy to see that a film of "The Road," shorn of Cormac McCarthy's prose, would—and could only—slow to a miserable plod, so Rob Marshall's new work was, from the start, bowed by the burden of its origins. It is adapted from a stage musical, which was in turn adapted from Fellini's "8½," which is all about a man who is unable to make a movie. For all the high-kicking oomph to which Marshall's film aspires, that sense of inertia lingers; we see it in Guido Contini (Daniel Day-Lewis), who doesn't even have a script on the eve of production. What he does have is the memory of women crowding in upon him, and each of them gets to say, or sing, her piece; the musical numbers are not embedded in the action but float alongside it as a form of fantastical commentary—again, hardly an incentive for dramatic pace. The singers are a distinguished company: Sophia Loren, Penélope Cruz, Nicole Kidman, Kate Hudson, Fergie, Judi Dench, and Marion Cotillard, with the laurels divided between the last two. But even Day-Lewis, for all his flair and cunning, cannot spice the proceedings with much joy, and we are left with a hymn to regret.—A.L. (12/21 & 28/09) (In wide release.)

PRECIOUS: BASED ON THE NOVEL "PUSH" BY SAPPHIRE

How you respond to Lee Daniels's film is likely to depend on two variables: first, to what extent the preposterous title will get your tongue in a twist,

and, second, whether or not you object to having extreme domestic abuse waved in front of your face. Gabourey Sidibe plays an obese, unhappy Harlem teen-ager named Clarence Jones; the task of the movie is to turn her nickname, Precious, from a wretched irony to a cause for pride—to surround her with people who will treasure her as she deserves. At the start, this seems a distant dream, since Precious is pregnant with her second child (by her own father) and trapped at home with her monster of a mother (Mo'Nique)—a withering portrait of indolence and wrath. (Might conservatives latch on to the film as a cautionary tale about an obsessive reliance on welfare? If so, that hardly seems to be what Daniels intended.) Precious finds hope in an alternative-school program, where she meets the beautiful and saintly—not to say implausible—figure of Blu Rain (Paula Patton). The tonal blend of damp-eyed fantasy and gruelling, closeup brutishness is at once morally suspect and highly effective in its manipulations; what rescues the story from the brink of the gothic is the poise and purpose of its leading performers—including Mariah Carey, no less, who is almost unrecognizable in her role as a social worker.—A.L. (11/9/09) (In wide release.)

POLICE, ADJECTIVE

Cristi (Dragos Bucur), a young plainclothes officer in the Romanian town of Vaslui, is assigned to follow a trio of teens, one of whom associates with a drug dealer. To Cristi's dismay, he is ordered to make a case against another kid in the group who is merely a user. The officer's struggle to resist his orders is the soul of this drama, directed by Corneliu Porumboiu, a quietly jolting dialectical and lexicographical masterwork. Porumboiu's images, all nouns and verbs, withhold inflection in order to highlight the moral weight of creating and interpreting information; his taut long takes maintain the tension of incisive scenes featuring debates about language. Cristi's wife, Anca (Irina Saulescu), is a literature teacher, and their dinnertime parsing of a pop song and of his grammar (with the dictates of the Romanian Academy cited as authority) sets the stage for the climactic showdown with his chief (Vlad Ivanov), which takes place over a dictionary. With a quietly scintillating depth, the movie ultimately reveals the odd title's chilling implications and casts over today's Romania dark shadows from its Soviet-dominated past. In Romanian.—R.B. (IFC Center.)

RED CLIFF

The action master John Woo, after years of directing (mostly middling) American films, returns to China for this epic story of a legendary third-century battle between a powerful emperor-backed general and two competing warlords. For its American release, Woo cut in half what was originally a two-part, five-hour film, and there's not a wasted minute. Gorgeously shot (by Lu Yue and Zhang Li) and beautifully acted (by Tony Leung, Zhang Fengyi, and Chiling Lin, among others), the film spreads Kurosawa-like swordplay onto a David Lean canvas and comes away with startlingly imaginative battle scenes (including one in which thousands of white-shafted arrows are fired at a barge, turning it into a floating flower arrangement). The plot, with its unusual battle plans and political intrigues, may not always be easy to follow, but Woo delivers supremely entertaining warfare.—B.D. (In wide release.)

RICKY

François Ozon's domestic fantasy, about an infant who sprouts wings and begins to fly, has the complexity of a television commercial and the moral of a greeting card. Katie (Alexandra Lamy), a factory worker and single mother who lives with her young daughter, Lisa (Mélysine Mayance), in a housing project, meets Paco (Sergi López), a Spanish immigrant, at work. He soon moves in with her, and she gets pregnant. Their newborn son (Arthur Peyret), the title character, is first a source of discord; then of wonder; and, ultimately, of simplistically bitter-sweet wistfulness. Ozon's graphic compositions are eye-catching but trivial; his situations are undeveloped; his characters, unrealized; his satire, banal; his whimsy, forced. In French.—R.B. (IFC Center.)

A SINGLE MAN

Tom Ford's debut feature is adapted from the novel of the same name by Christopher Isherwood. Colin Firth plays George, who teaches literature at a col-

lege in Los Angeles in 1962; we find him bereaved after the death of his lover, Jim (Matthew Goode), although the action skips back in time, to show us the languor of the life they shared. There is barely enough here to sustain a plot, and much of the movie passes in a gleaming, immaculate haze; in keeping with the director's other career, as a fashion designer, no chance is missed to deck the characters in the neat, crisp outfits of the period, or to bathe them in the flattering rose light of the city. (Does Jim make his first appearance in George's life wearing white naval ducks? Of course he does.) Yet the film is pulled from its dreaminess by two performances: first, that of Firth, who shows how a heart can be both tightened and undone by grief (especially a grief that needs to be kept secret), and, second, that of Julianne Moore, who plays his drunken friend. The long evening they spend together, dicing with love and the knowledge of wasted years, is a scene not to be forgotten, or denied. With Nicholas Hoult as a precocious flirt.—A.L. (12/21 & 28/09) (In wide release.)

SOIGNE TON GAUCHE

Lovers of Jacques Tati will be jolted by the beginning of this 1936 short, his first film: the stiff comic jaunt of a rural bicycle postman, played not by Tati but by one Max Martel. Tati instead turns up as a farm boy with dreams of athletic glory (he mimes a Tour de France champion for the local kids), who, when shadow-boxing between bales of hay, is pressed into service (to his mother's irritation) as a sparring partner for a heavyweight in training. (The title means "Keep Your Left Hand Up.") Tati was already famous in Paris for his onstage mimicry of athletes; this brief showcase, directed by René Clément, is merely serviceable, but it's fascinating to see Tati squirm as he attempts to portray a character with a family and a background. When, after the war, he began to direct himself, he became the postman (in "Jour de Fête") as well as a host of other transients whose flat, elusive mobility was a vertiginously shifting mirror of modernity. In French.—R.B. (MOMA; Dec. 30 and Jan. 1.)

SWING TIME

Even between numbers, the sixth Fred Astaire-Ginger Rogers musical, from 1936, boasts a helter-skelter goofiness that's a perfect fit for his offhand comic dexterity and her sane sense of humor. (When she isn't tripping the light fantastic, her feet are planted firmly on the ground.) He's a happy hooper and a gambler; she's a dance instructor who teams up with him. The complication is that he's already engaged. The director, George Stevens, can't do much with the ungainly contours and klutzy running jokes of Howard Lindsay and Allan Scott's script, but he manages to capture the stars at their warmest and loosest, abetted by deft turns from the affectionately gruff Helen Broderick and the eccentric Victor Moore (who gets laughs with a dissembling whine). And the singing, the dancing, and the Dorothy Fields-Jerome Kern score are paradisaical. The tunes include "The Way You Look Tonight," "A Fine Romance," "Bojangles of Harlem," and "Never Gonna Dance"; the choreographic high point, set to the instrumental "Waltz in Swing Time" (arranged and mostly composed by Robert Russell Bennett), is a breathless blend of intricacy that seals the partners' love in roughly two and a half minutes.—Michael Sragow (Film Forum; Dec. 30.)

UP IN THE AIR

At long last, George Clooney meets his match. There have been previous attempts to pair him in romantic comedies, such as "Intolerable Cruelty," but, from the moment when, playing a business traveller named Ryan Bingham, he picks up Alex Goran (Vera Farmiga) in a bar, we realize that a battle of equals has commenced. Bingham fires people for a living (the director, Jason Reitman, could not have timed his movie better), while most of his own living is done on planes and in hotel rooms; he is a rootless soul who mistakes his emptiness for freedom, and it takes the efforts of Alex, his occasional lover, and of Natalie (Anna Kendrick), his perky new colleague, to school him in the error of his ways. Reitman's film both satisfies and dismays; the one-liners fly back and forth, but, if you happen to look down, there are oceans of hopelessness below. With Jason Bateman as Bingham's cynical boss.—A.L. (12/7/09) (In wide release.)

THE WHITE RIBBON

Even those who have resisted—or, indeed, recoiled from—the work of Michael Haneke may find themselves drawn into the calm and complicated tale that he tells in his latest film. We find ourselves in a village in northern, Protestant Germany, a year before the outbreak of the First World War, and there, with only the briefest of excursions to the world beyond, we stay. We also come to know, or think we know, the home lives of its leading citizens, including the local baron (Ulrich Tukur), the pastor (Burghart Klaußner), the doctor (Rainer Bock), and his frightened housekeeper (Susanne Lothar). More baffling are the lives of their various children, who are the victims of, and, we increasingly suspect, the possible culprits in, a series of mysterious crimes. This being a Haneke project, no case is thoroughly solved, and the air of threat that looms over the population is never dispelled; we can readily imagine, in fact, that its malignity might endure for years to come—perhaps to the verge of another war. The film, however, should not be read as a plain parable of incipient Nazism; the warning that it issues, about the fallout of social repression, is a universal one, and the manner of its delivery is disarmingly graceful. The monochrome imagery is not just jewel-sharp but, unusually for Haneke, touched with moments of loveliness and hints of peace, as in the subplot of a schoolteacher (Christian Friedel) and his beloved (Leonie Benesch). You expect harm to befall them, like a plague, but, for once, it stays its hand. In German.—A.L. (In limited release.)

THE YOUNG VICTORIA

Jean-Marc Vallée's account of Queen Victoria's early life, which begins in her childhood and ends in married bliss, is stately, handsome, and dull, though not quite as factually scrupulous as that description might suggest. It will be news to historians of nineteenth-century England, for instance, that Prince Albert (Rupert Friend) nobly took a bullet when an assassin fired upon Her Majesty, in 1840. (All reports agree that he missed.) There are entertaining portraits of various whiskered gentlemen, led by Mark Strong as the hissable Sir John Conroy, who sought to control the royal household, and Paul Bettany as a freakishly young Lord Melbourne. But the movie is held together and invigorated by Emily Blunt, in the title role; she delivers both the animation of youth and a proper horror at being besieged by the machinery of state. With Jim Broadbent as her splenetic predecessor.—A.L. (12/21 & 28/09) (In wide release.)

Also Playing

A CHRISTMAS CAROL: In wide release. **DID YOU HEAR ABOUT THE MORGANS?:** In wide release. **SITA SINGS THE BLUES:** IFC Center.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

FILM FORUM

W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—
"Madcap Manhattan." Dec. 30 at 1, 4:35, and 8:10:
"Swing Time" (†). ♦ Dec. 30 at 3, 6:35, and 10:10:
"Bachelor Mother" (1939, Garson Kanin). ♦ Dec. 31 and Jan. 1 at 1:10, 5:30, and 9:50: "The Apartment" (1960, Billy Wilder). ♦ Dec. 31 and Jan. 1 at 3:20 and 7:40: "Breakfast at Tiffany's" (1961, Blake Edwards). ♦ Jan. 2 at 1:30, 5:40, and 9:50: "The Seven Year Itch" (1955, Billy Wilder). ♦ Jan. 2 at 3:30 and 7:40: "It's Always Fair Weather" (1955, Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen). ♦ Jan. 3 at 2, 5:40, and 9:20: "Easy Living" (†). ♦ Jan. 3 at 3:45 and 7:25: "The Devil and Miss Jones" (1941, Sam Wood). ♦ Jan. 4 at 1, 4:25, and 7:50: "Lady for a Day" (1933, Frank Capra). ♦ Jan. 4 at 2:50, 6:15, and 9:40: "Little Miss Marker" (1934, Alexander Hall). ♦ Jan. 5 at 1, 5:05, and 10: "A Thousand Clowns" (1965, Fred Coe). ♦ Jan. 5 at 3:15 and 7:20: "Taking Off" (1971, Milos Forman).

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

Walter Reade Theatre, Lincoln Center (212-875-5610)—"Back by Popular Demand." Dec. 30 at

1:30 and 6:15: "Youth Knows No Pain" (2009, Mitch McCabe). ♦ Dec. 30 at 3:30: "The Hurt Locker" (2008, Kathryn Bigelow). ♦ Dec. 30 at 8:10 and Dec. 31 at 4:15: "Séraphine" (2008, Martin Provost; in French). ♦ Dec. 31 at 1 and 6:30: "Solaris" (1972, Andrei Tarkovsky; in Russian). ♦ The films of Louis Malle. Except where noted, all films are in French. Jan. 1 at 1:45 and 6:30, Jan. 2 at 6:30, Jan. 3 at 9:10, Jan. 4 at 4:10, and Jan. 5 at 2:30: "My Dinner with Andre" (1981; in English). ♦ Jan. 1 at 4 and Jan. 2 at 9: "Murmur of the Heart" (1971). ♦ Jan. 1 at 8:45, Jan. 2 at 2:15, Jan. 3 at 7:20, and Jan. 4 at 2:15: "The Lovers" (1958). ♦ Jan. 2 at noon and Jan. 4 at 6:30: "The Fire Within" (1963). ♦ Jan. 2 at 4:10 and Jan. 4 at 8:45: "Vanya on 42nd Street" (1994; in English). ♦ Jan. 3 at noon: "Phantom India," Part One (1969). ♦ Jan. 3 at 3: "Phantom India," Part Two (1969).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—"An Auteurist History of Film." Dec. 30-31 at 1:30: "Anthology of Italian Cinema, Part I (1895-1926)." ♦ "Nuts and Bolts: Machine Made Man." Dec. 30 at 4: "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (1991, James Cameron) and "The Legend of John Henry" (1974, Sam Weiss). ♦ Dec. 31 at 4: "Alphaville" (1965, Jean-Luc Godard) and "Felix the Cat in Astronomeous" (1928, Otto Messmer). ♦ Jan. 2 at 1:30: "Frankenstein Meets the Space Monster" (1965, Robert Gaffney) and "Lineage" (1979, George Griffin). ♦ The films of Jacques Tati. Dec. 30 at 4:30 and Jan. 1 at 7: "Sylvie et le Fantôme" (1945, Claude Autant-Lara; in French), preceded by "Soigne Ton Gauche" (†). ♦ Jan. 2 at 7: "Traffic" (1971; in French). ♦ "Best Years: Going to the Movies, 1945-46." Dec. 30 at 7: "The Rainbow" (1944, Mark Donskoy). ♦ "The Contenders, 2009." Dec. 30 at 8 and Dec. 31 at 4:30: "Summer Hours"

(2008, Olivier Assayas; in French). ♦ Jan. 2 at 4 and Jan. 3 at 2: "The Hangover" (2009, Todd Phillips). ♦ "Tim Burton and the Lurid Beauty of Monsters." Jan. 1 at 4:30: "Planet of the Apes" (2001). ♦ Jan. 1 at 8: "Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1932, Robert Florey). ♦ Jan. 2 at 2 and Jan. 4 at 8: "Plan 9 from Outer Space" (1951, Edward Wood). ♦ Jan. 2 at 5: "Ed Wood" (1994). ♦ Jan. 2 at 8 and Jan. 3 at 2: "Dracula" (1931, Tod Browning). ♦ Jan. 3 at 4: "Frankenstein" (1931, James Whale). ♦ Jan. 3 at 6: "The Raven" (1935, Lew Landers). ♦ Jan. 4 at 4:30: "Mars Attacks!" (1996).

SUNSHINE CINEMA

143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—"Sunshine@Midnight." Jan. 1-2: "The Muppet Movie" (1979, James Frawley).

READINGS AND TALKS

NEW YEAR'S DAY MARATHON READING

A hundred and forty poets and performers, including Penny Arcade, Yoshiko Chuma, Steve Earle, John Giorno, Taylor Mead, Judith Malina, Jonas Mekas, Eileen Myles, and Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, gather for the thirty-sixth annual marathon reading at the Poetry Project. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-0910. Jan. 1, starting at 2.)

CORNELIA STREET CAFÉ

The poets Kat Georges, Peter Carlaftes, Angelo Verga, George Wallace, and Ryan Buynak read from the works of the great writer and drinker Charles Bukowski. Attendees are welcome to read their favorite Bukowski poem or an original inspired by the late postman. (29 Cornelia St. 212-989-9319. Jan. 1 at 6.)

"PORTRAITS OF POETS: 1910-2010"

The Poetry Society of America launches its centennial celebration with an exhibition of more than a hundred and fifty drawings, photographs, and oil paintings of W. B. Yeats, Marianne Moore, Etheridge Knight, Adrienne Rich, and many other noted writers. The show, which includes many images of the poets in childhood, opens with a benefit reading on Jan. 5 at 6, featuring Galway Kinnell, Marie Ponsot, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Richard Howard. At 7 on the same evening, the poet Sapphire reads from her new work, in an appearance that is open to the public and free of charge. (National Arts Club, 15 Gramercy Park S. For more information, call 212-254-9628. Through Jan. 15.)

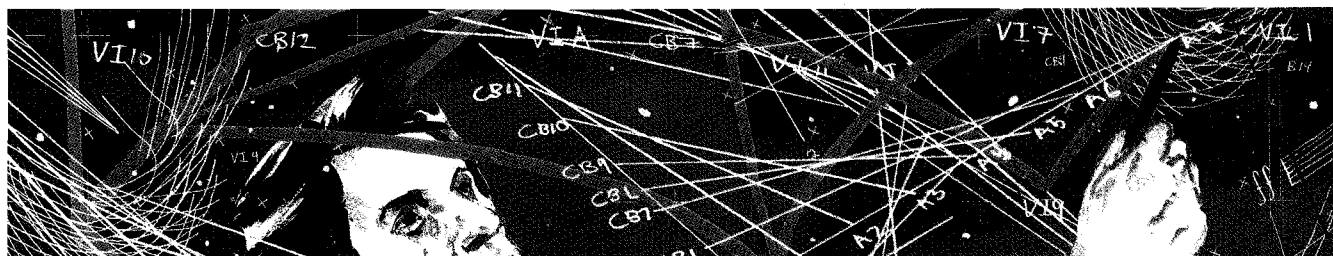
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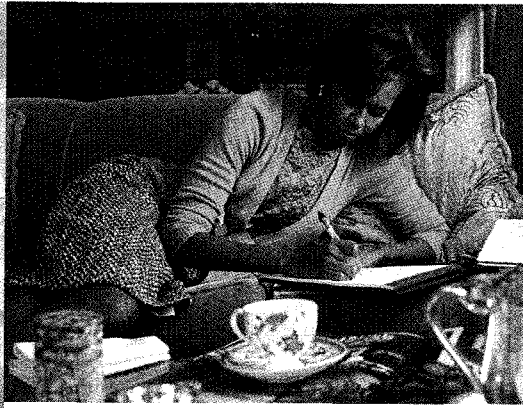
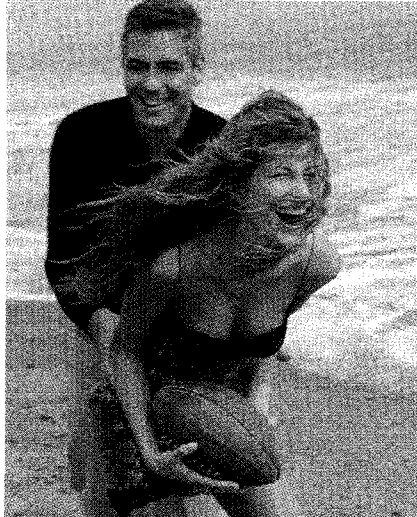
NEW YEAR'S DAY SWIM

The Coney Island Polar Bear Club, whose motto is "Every day is a beach day," takes its annual celebratory dip in the icy North Atlantic. As has been the case in recent years, the event (which is open to all) is for more than just bragging rights; donations go to Camp Sunshine, a nonprofit retreat in Maine for children with life-threatening illnesses and their families. (Swim time is at 1. For more information, visit www.polarbearclub.org.)

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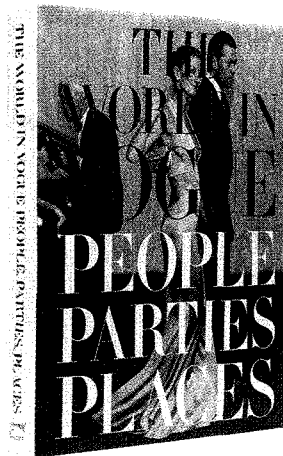
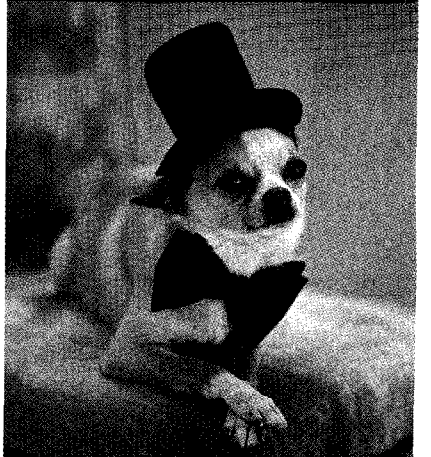




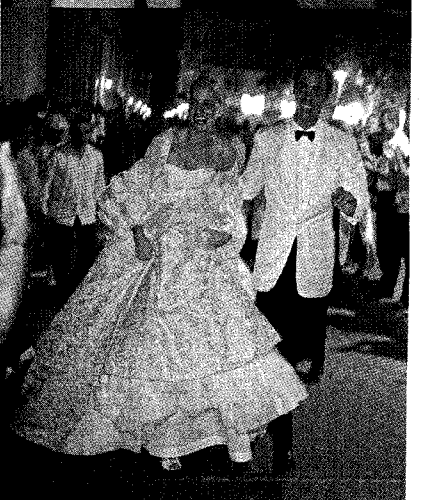
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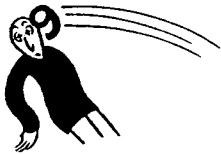
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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT WHAT DO YOU CALL IT?



In retrospect, it might be recognized as a troubling harbinger that, ten years ago, no consensus could be reached in this country on what to call the decade upon which we were about to embark. The ohs? The double-ohs? The zeros? The zips? The nadas? The naughties? As the reassuringly comprehensible nineties were drawing to a close, all these were suggested as possible designations for the coming era. When Madison Avenue and the collective editorial boards of the nation's newspapers failed to come up with a killer appellation in advance, there was at least confidence that, by decade's end, a majority-pleasing solution to the problem of decennial nomenclature would have presented itself.

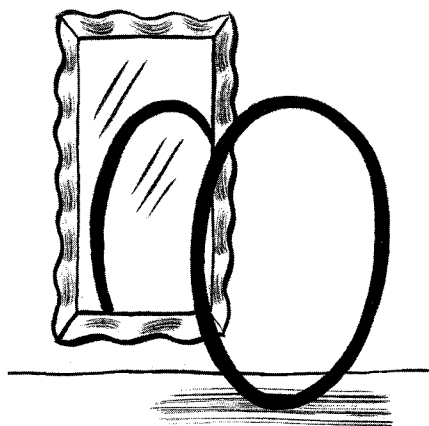
As we near the end, however, we still don't have a good collective name for the first decade of the twenty-first century—at least, not one beyond “the first decade of the twenty-first century,” which is gratifyingly lacking in cuteness but may be too wordy for practicality, particularly given contemporary constraints. (Call it that on Twitter, and you've used up a third of your character allotment.) Arguably, a grudging agreement has been reached

on calling the decade “the aughts,” but that unfortunate term is rooted in a linguistic error. The use of “aught” to mean “nothing,” “zero,” or “cipher” is a nineteenth-century corruption of the word “naught,” which actually does mean nothing, and which, as in the phrase “all for naught,” is still in current usage. Meanwhile, the adoption of “the aughts” as the decade's name only accelerates the almost complete obsolescence of the actual English word “aught,” a concise and poetic near-synonym for “anything” that has for centuries well served writers, including Shakespeare (“I never gave you aught,” Hamlet says to Ophelia, in an especially ungenerous moment, before she goes off and drowns) and Milton (“To do aught good never will be our task / But ever to do ill our sole delight,” Satan declares near the beginning of “Paradise Lost,” before slinking up to tempt Eve). To call the decade “the aughts” is a compromise that

pleases no one, and that has more than a whiff of resigned settling about it.

But perhaps that's appropriate, since this turned out to be the decade in which there were no good answers. It began in overwrought hysteria: recall that, this time ten years ago, the fear was abroad that civilization would come to a standstill, if not an end, when the world's computers failed to recognize a date that didn't begin with the digits 1 and 9. Having readied ourselves for that disaster, the one that actually did materialize, a year and a half later—the terrorist attacks of September, 2001—came as a surprise, even, apparently, to those who had been privy to intelligence memos warning of impending harm from militant-Islamist quarters. It has been suggested that the appropriate designation for this decade might be “the post-9/11 era”—an unswinging if otherwise apposite sobriquet. Others argue that to name the decade thus would be letting the terrorists win—as if the cumulative casualties of war and the infringements of civil liberties that took place under President Bush were not already evidence of at least partial victory on that score.

The events of and reaction to September 11th seem to be the decade's defining catastrophe, although it could be argued that it was in the voting booths of Florida, with their flawed and faulty machines, that the crucial historical turn took place. (In the alternate decade of fantasy, President Gore, forever slim and with hairline intact, not only



reads those intelligence memos in the summer of 2001 but acts upon them; he also ratifies the Kyoto Protocol and invents something even better than the Internet.) And if September 11th marked the beginning of this unnameable decade, its end was signalled by President Obama's Nobel acceptance speech, in which he spoke of what he called the "difficult questions about the relationship between war and peace, and our effort to replace one with the other," and painstakingly outlined the absence of any good answers to the questions in question.

In between those two poles, the decade saw the unimaginable unfolding: the depravities of Abu Ghraib, and, even more shocking, their apparent lack of impact on voters in the 2004 Presidential election; the horrors of Hurricane Katrina and the flight of twenty-five thousand of the country's poorest people to the only slightly less hostile environs of the Superdome; the grotesque inflation and catastrophic popping of a housing bubble, exposing an economy built not even on sand but on fairy dust; the astonishing near-collapse of the world financial system, and the discovery that the assumed ironclad laws of the marketplace were only about as reliable as superstition. And, after all this, the still more remarkable: the election of a certified intellectual as President, not to mention an African-American one.

There was the ascent of the digital

realm—with the happy surrender, on the part of hundreds of millions, to the congenial omniscience and possibly less congenial omnipotence of Google, and the perplexingly popular appeal of making available online all manner of information of the sort formerly considered private. Who would have dreamed, at the decade's outset, not only that something like Facebook would exist but that, thanks to it, anyone would be able to view photographs of the company's C.E.O., Mark Zuckerberg, in pajama bottoms and with red-eye uncorrected, lounging in an armchair and clutching a Teddy bear to his chest? Or that anyone would want to? And what of those other unlikely innovations and unforeseen blights of the era—small plates, Bump for the iPhone, Sarah Palin, Chinese drywall, jeggings?

Given all that has emerged in the past ten years, the failure to invent a satisfactory name for the period seems overdetermined—a reflection of our sense that the so-called aughts were not all they ought to have been, and were so much less than they promised to be. With its intractable conflicts and its irresolvable crises, its astonishing accomplishments and its devastating failures, the decade just gone by remains unnamed and unclaimed, an orphaned era that no one quite wants to own, or own up to—or, truth be told, to have aught else to do with at all.

—Rebecca Mead

HERE TO THERE DEPT. AIRPLANE 3



A hundred and eight comedians flew in from L.A. the other day, and, boy, are their arms tired. They landed in Chicago, to attend the fiftieth-birthday reunion of the comedy troupe Second City, and, actually, they flew on a Boeing 737 that was donated by Southwest Airlines. The passengers, who included comedy writers, actors, and assorted behind-the-scenes alums, gathered at LAX, dressed for the cold in unfamiliar big coats and a startling variety of berets. (Steve Carell, Harold Ramis, Eugene Levy, Stephen Colbert, Martin Short, and Catherine O'Hara, among others, would meet them in Chicago.) Brandy King, a spokesperson for Southwest, explained the airline's largesse: "Humor is a big part of our company."

"This is like a family reunion," said Tino Insana, '73, who does the voice for a pig character on a Nickelodeon show. "You might hear a story about Bill Murray. Let me tell you: they're all true."

Carrying hardbound Second City yearbooks for signing, the passengers filed onto the plane. Three young comedians in Row 15 mined the Sky Mall catalogue for gags. Their first bit: devise captions for generic photographs, like one of a man and a young girl pointing at a map of the world. "This is where Daddy's moving," Ithamar Enriquez, '06, suggested.

The cabin doors were about to close. "We made a bet that Hagerty's the last guy on the plane," Richard Kind, '83 ("A Serious Man"), said. "You'll recognize him. But you won't know from where." At 9:47 A.M., Mike Hagerty, '83, a familiar-looking, heavyset actor with a mustache, bounded down the aisle. "I feel like Rosa Parks," said Hagerty (his credits run from "Brewster's Millions" to "Entourage"), as he and his wife plopped into empty seats at the back of the plane. Minutes after takeoff, the little airplane bottles of alcohol started flowing.

"Planes are fun places to set bits," Matt Craig, '05, said, somewhere over



"Sorry—I live in a parallel universe."

Death Valley. He did a short improv with his comedy partner, Frank Caeti, '04.

CRAIG: Lights up. Two guys. We're over a drop zone.

CAETI: I don't want to jump.

CRAIG: You have to jump.

CAETI: But I'm scared.

CRAIG: This is when I push him out of the plane and say, "Thank you for flying Southwest."

After the "blackout" (the Second City term for a short setup followed by a punch line), Caeti returned to what he called "having sex with pictures": rubbing photos from the in-flight magazine against the front of his pants. Three hours to go.

Around eleven-thirty, Frances Callier, '86, who, with Angela Shelton, '93, is part of the comedy duo Frangela, announced that she would do a sketch called "Crazy Zombie Grandma Bitch." She was interrupted by Matt Dwyer, '94, who inserted a half-eaten ham sandwich between her clothed breasts.

"It's going to be a panini in a few minutes," Callier quickly improv'd. "There you go, lightly grilled." She added, "There's no such thing as harassment in Second City."

As the plane cruised at thirty-five thousand feet over Lincoln, Nebraska, Nia Vardalos, '91 (she wrote and starred in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding"), and her friend Jenna Jolovitz, '95, discussed the bond between Second City alums. "You never really stop thinking about them," Vardalos said. "We know the *real* each other. We've failed onstage together."

"We say 'fuck' a lot. And 'asshole,'" Jolovitz said. "We're dirty and bawdy. But not in front of our kids."

At 12:55 P.M., a passenger seized the P.A. system and asked everyone to close the window shades and press the call buttons. The plane went dark, except for four rows of orange lights—like candles on a cake. Then everyone sang "Happy Birthday" to Isabella Hofmann, '83, as a flight attendant named Doreen placed a crown made of honey-roasted-peanut packets and swizzlesticks on her head. Hofmann, clearly moved, blew out the figurative candles.

"The swizzlesticks are poking my head," she said. "But I feel like Jesus."

Another flight attendant announced that someone had lost a pair of glasses.

"I lost my hundred-dollar bill!" Bill Appelbaum, '83, shouted.

At 3:21 P.M. Central Time, the plane

landed in Chicago, to applause. A flight attendant named Kevin explained that the jet would be towed to a hangar, where, once the passengers made it down a freezing rolling staircase, they would be greeted by champagne, news crews, and the governor of Illinois (he cancelled). "One little reminder: in the age of YouTube, watch your step!" Kevin said. "And a heartfelt thank you to all of you. You give America the gift of laughter."

"Oh, fuck you!" yelled Appelbaum.

—Marshall Heyman

THE BOARDS NORSE GODDESS



Liv Ullmann—actor, director, muse—has been in town for her production of "A Streetcar Named Desire," at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and the other day she dropped by the Chanin Building, on East Forty-second Street, to perform a role for which she is less well known, that of honorary chair of the Women's Refugee Commission. Ullmann had in tow a woman with mussed short blond hair and Prada glasses: "the Barbara Walters of Norway," as Ullmann put it, who is making a documentary about her. The Barbara Walters of Norway—whose name is Anne Grosvold—was wearing comfy flats and carrying her own tripod, something that the Barbara Walters of America probably hasn't done for a while.

Ullmann, who wore a black batwing sweater over a red satin blouse and black pants, explained to Grosvold that she helped found the commission twenty years ago, after she became involved with its parent organization, the International Rescue Committee, while appearing in the Broadway musical "I Remember Mama." Ullmann was drafted to present a fund-raising check to Leo Cherne, then the chairman of the I.R.C.'s board. "I said to him, 'If you ever need me, just call upon me,' and he called upon me the next day," she said. Cherne asked her to fly to Thailand to participate in a March for Survival, along with Joan Baez, Elie Wiesel, and Alexander Ginzburg, the

Russian dissident, who had just been released from jail. "I knew nothing—I was a privileged person in every way," Ullmann said.

Robert Devecchi, the president emeritus of the I.R.C., arrived, leaning on a cane, and Ullmann gave a cry of delight. "How are you, Bob?" she said.

"I was fine until I got into New York traffic," Devecchi groaned.

"Well, what do you expect," Ullmann said, soothingly.

"I expect nothing," Devecchi said, with a theatrical sigh.

"This used to be an idealist who expected everything from everyone!" Ullmann said. Devecchi was her escort on her first visit to a refugee camp, she explained. "People heard that a film star was coming," she said. "Bob is, and was, tremendously handsome, and when we arrived there everyone from the I.R.C. came over and said to Bob, 'What films were you in?'"

Devecchi gave his own account of the encounter. "I was thinking, The last thing I need to do is put on a dog-and-



Liv Ullmann

pony show for these celebrities," he said. "Then a car pulls up in front of the New Imperial Hotel, and the door opens, and I could see this strawberry-reddish hair, and then she looked right at me. She has the most famous eyes in the world—that combination of strength and helplessness and sensuousness and integrity—and my knees buckled."

Ullmann popped into the office of

George Rupp, the current head of the I.R.C. Attempting to explain Ullmann's gift for refugee work, Rupp talked about how she had once played the role of Anne Frank. "And you may not know that her grandfather died in Dachau, as a consequence of trying to save Jews," he added.

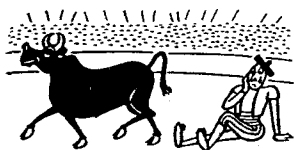
"I'm surprised that you would know that," Ullmann said, her eyes widening.

A few days later, Ullmann, still trailed by Grosvold, appeared at a reception at BAM, following a matinee of "Streetcar" that benefitted the W.R.C. Ullmann, who was in a knee-length black skirt and high heels, said that her priority in all spheres was to connect with people, and she described to the crowd an encounter with some street children in Bogotá, whom she took to a restaurant. "They wanted chicken wings, and when the food arrived they waited for me to take some first," she said. "And, as we sat there, I felt a little hand appear here"—she touched her own forearm—"and another arm would be there," and she gestured toward her neck. "They were in need of a grownup person, maybe even a woman."

After Ullmann spoke, Cate Blanchett, who has been playing Blanche DuBois, told her Norwegian interviewer that it was an honor to work with her. "I've been stalking Liv for years," Blanchett said. Carolyn Makinson, the executive director of the commission, said, of Ullmann, "She has an extraordinary empathy." She added that when Ullmann needs to communicate about commission business she doesn't use e-mail: she prefers the phone. "You hope you're out when she calls, because she leaves these wonderful messages," Makinson said. "I listen to them for a month before my voice mail erases them."

—Rebecca Mead

RAG TRADE CAPE CRUSADER



Justo Algaba, one of the world's most respected matador tailors, was in town the other day from Madrid, where he has a two-story shop devoted to the production of matador outfits, called

trajes de luce ("suits of light"), because of their shimmer, multicolored adornments. Algaba makes more than a hundred and fifty matador suits each year—"Every suit I make is like having a child," he has said. He does freelance work, too, collaborating, for instance, with a Paris couturier on a line of embroidered dresses. He came to New York at the request of the Metropolitan Opera, which had hired him to create the matador clothes for its new production of "Carmen," which opens this week.

One afternoon, Algaba stood in a dressing room off the Met's costume shop, doing a fitting for some matador supernumeraries. (They will appear in a procession in Act IV, when Carmen's lover Escamillo fights a bull.) He wore an oxford shirt, a teal tie, and gray pants, and had a pincushion on his wrist; he was accompanied by a translator named Matt Humphrey. Algaba helped one of the performers, Brian Baldwin, pull on a pair of high-waisted black matador pants. The pants were tight, and Baldwin is stocky, so Algaba had to yank.

"Ay," he muttered. "*Bien*."

He snapped some buttons closed on Baldwin's pants, added a *camisa* (a frilly shirt) and a short jacket (a temporary muslin version; he would make the final one later, in his workshop), and fiddled with Baldwin's hot-pink stockings ("*una tradición*," he said). While he worked, Algaba talked. "In the seventeen- and eighteen-hundreds, the clothes used to be a lot baggier," he said, through his translator. "Then, in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, they started dressing like this, and the fashion really hasn't changed." The tightness of the clothes helps the matadors maintain "*un nivel de concentración*": "It's like a second skin." When Algaba was done, he added a black hat with orbs on either side. It gave Baldwin, who has a thin beard, a Princess Leia look.

"*Bien*?" Algaba said.

Baldwin nodded. "*Bien*," he said.

Algaba talked about the industry. "*En todo el mundo*," he said, there are five matador tailors, and they all know each other. They all live in Madrid. Their clients come from Mexico, South America, Spain, and Portugal; a good matador will order between six and ten

suits a year, for around three thousand euros each. For a first-time client, Algaba said, he will start with a two- or three-hour meeting. "They're just talking," his translator added. "Getting to know each other." Many bullfighters let Algaba take creative license; for instance, for Paco Ojeda, a Mexican bullfighter whom Algaba considered a star—"una estrella del toreo"—he created a suit with stars and poinsettia flowers. Other matadors are picky, especially about color. There is a lot of superstition. Yellow is thought to be bad luck, in the theatre and in the bullring, but some matadors wear it anyway. Algaba recalled, "There was one bullfighter"—Jesulín de Ubrique, of Spain—"who was very lucky with the ladies. And there was another bullfighter"—Manolo Mejia, of Mexico—"who'd seen that de Ubrique had so much luck he was wondering if wearing the same kind of yellow suit would work for him as well." So the Mexican tried a yellow suit—"and it worked."

While Algaba was marking a jacket with chalk, Baldwin asked, in a quiet voice, "*Conoces Fernando Ochoa?*" Ochoa, a Mexican, is one of the best bullfighters in the world. Baldwin happens to be married to Ochoa's sister.

"Ah, sí?" Algaba said. "*Es una coincidencia*." Algaba is Ochoa's tailor. "*Bueno*," Algaba said. Ochoa "has absolutely no superstition." He doesn't mind yellows, and so Algaba has used lots of them, as well as whites and—he pointed to his tie—"a blue a little bit darker than this one."

Algaba has been in the business for forty-five years. His father traded livestock. Growing up in the provinces of northern Spain, he wanted to be an airline pilot. One day, when he was eighteen, he saw a help-wanted ad for a tailor's shop. He wandered in and encountered the famous bullfighter El Cordobés, who was being fitted for a suit. The translator explained Algaba's thought process: "He remembered that, four years beforehand, he'd made a promise to himself that he'd either be a bullfighter or make clothes for them. And he'd forgotten about it until that moment."

"I believe very much in the destiny of a person," Algaba said.

—Lizzie Widdicombe

THE FINANCIAL PAGE FIFTH WHEEL

Reforming America's health-insurance system was never going to be an easy task, given people's natural aversion to change (not to mention Republicans' aversion to doing anything that might help Barack Obama). But what's made the task even more difficult is that American politicians—as well as American voters—have a confused, and often contradictory, set of beliefs about how health insurance should work. The wayward, patchwork plan that we seem likely to end up with is probably a good reflection of the wayward, patchwork opinions that most legislators have on the subject.

Consider the Genetic Information Nondiscrimination Act, which went into effect in November. The law prohibits health insurers from using genetic information to set rates or deny coverage. At the moment, genetic testing for disease is still relatively crude and uncommon. That will change in the future. People who know that they are much more likely to get sick, and therefore much more likely to run up huge medical bills, will be able to get insurance at the same price as those with less risky genetic profiles. Everyone, it turns out, supports this: the bill passed unanimously in the Senate, and nearly so in the House.

Politicians on both sides of the aisle overwhelmingly believe, likewise, that insurance companies should be prohibited from taking preexisting conditions into account when setting prices or extending coverage. Both the House and the Senate reform bills include language banning this. Even Republicans have been vehement on the subject: Senator Tom Coburn, of Oklahoma, has said that “everyone agrees” that we need to eliminate the use of preexisting conditions, while Senator Chuck Grassley, of Iowa, declared that insurers have to be barred from “charging higher premiums to people who are sick.” The insurance companies themselves have accepted that the only factors they'll be allowed to take into account in setting prices will be age, region, and whether or not someone smokes. The general consensus, then, is that even if you're already sick, and guaranteed to run up huge medical bills in

the future, you should be able to get health insurance at the same price as someone your age who's perfectly healthy. Economists have a name for this: “community rating.” And the fact that it has such strong backing in Washington is heartening. Americans, and American politicians, have decided that people should have guaranteed access to insurance, and that they shouldn't have to worry about losing it just because they get laid off or fall ill.

So where's the contradiction? Well, Congress's support for community rating and universal access doesn't fit well with its insistence that health-care reform must rely on private insurance companies. After all, measuring risk, and setting prices accordingly, is the *raison d'être* of a health-



insurance company. The way individual insurance works now, risk and price are linked. If you're a triathlete with no history of cancer in your family, you're a reasonably good risk, and so you can get an affordable policy that will protect you against unforeseen disaster; if you're overweight with high blood pressure and a history of heart problems, your risk of becoming seriously ill is substantial, and therefore private insurers will either charge you high premiums or not offer you coverage at all. This kind of risk evaluation—what's called “medical underwriting”—is fundamental to the insurance business. But it is precisely what all the new reform plans will ban. Congress is effectively making private insurers unnecessary, yet continuing to insist that we can't do without them.

The truth is that we could do just fine without them: an insurance system with community rating and universal access has no need of private insurers. In fact, the U.S. already has such a system: it's known as Medicare. In most areas, it's true, private companies do a better job of managing costs and providing services than the government does. But not when it comes to health care: over the past decade, Medicare's spending has risen more slowly than that of private insurers. A single-payer system also has the advantage of spreading risk across the biggest patient pool possible. So if you want to make health insurance available to everyone, regardless of risk, the most sensible solution would be to expand Medicare to everyone. That's not going to happen. The fear of government-run health care, the power of vested interests, and the difficulty of completely overhauling the system have made the single-payer solution a bridge too far for Washington, and for much of the public as well. (Support for a single-payer system hovers around fifty per cent.) That's why the current reform plans rely instead on a mishmash of regulations, national exchanges, and subsidies. Instead of replacing private insurance companies, the proposed reforms would, in theory, turn them into something like public utilities. That's how it works in the Netherlands and Switzerland, with reasonably good results.

One could recoil in disgust at the inefficiency and incoherence of the process—at the fact that private insurers will continue to make billions a year providing services the government has shown, via Medicare, that it can provide on its own. But, messy as the reform plans are, they can still dramatically transform the system for the good. Reform would guarantee that tens of millions of people who don't have insurance will get it, and that people who have insurance now won't have to worry about losing it. And, by writing community rating and universal access into law, Congress will effectively be committing itself to the idea that health care, regardless of risk, is a right. If a little incoherence is the price of that deal, it's worth paying.

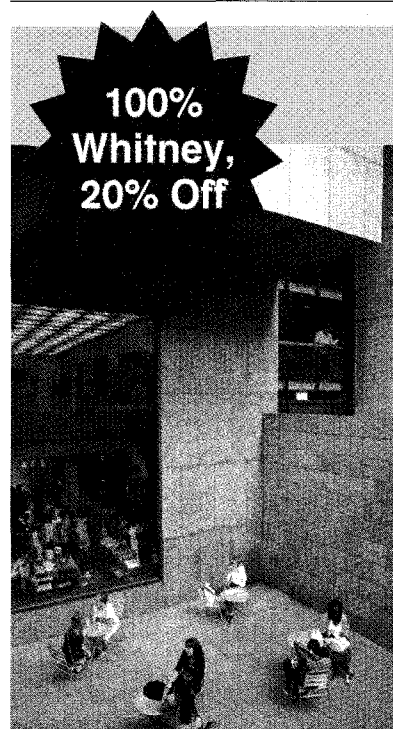
—James Surowiecki

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LETTER FROM CALIFORNIA

PROTEST STUDIES

The state is broke, and Berkeley is in revolt.

BY TAD FRIEND

The University of California has long been America's best public university; it's our immersion blender, whipping up the cream. Eight of its ten campuses made this year's *U.S. News & World Report* Top 100, even as nearly a third of U.C.'s students received Pell grants, reserved for the nation's neediest undergraduates. U.C. is also the country's most multifarious university, comprising five medical centers, four law schools, three Department of Energy laboratories—and, suddenly, two serious problems. It's as broke as the state that funds it, and many of its faculty and students are in open rebellion.

In July, after California voters rejected ballot initiatives that would have revitalized a state balance sheet that the California treasurer, Bill Lockyer, calls "a train wreck," Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a starveling budget that cut U.C.'s allocation by \$637 million, or twenty per cent. As a result, two thousand U.C. staff members will lose their jobs, and the remaining staff and faculty were asked to take furlough days amounting to pay cuts of four to ten per cent. This inflamed the worry that the best teachers would leave for richer schools, taking with them both the most promising graduate students and the university's prestige. The entire project of public education seemed in jeopardy.

In mid-September, U.C.'s Board of Regents discussed a budget-balancing plan proposed by the university's deeply unpopular president, Mark Yudof. The plan would increase undergraduate fees thirty-two per cent, to \$10,302 a year, and make an exception to U.C.'s own policy by raising fees in twenty-four graduate programs above those of competing public institutions. After a meeting where police had to clear the room of protesters, who chanted "Whose university? Our university!" the Regents agreed to vote on the plan when they met again, on November 19th. This gave the opposition

plenty of time to write fiery editorials and to organize protests. On September 24th, more than five thousand people walked out of their jobs and classes and rallied in Berkeley's Sproul Plaza, some of them naked except for signs that read "BUDGET TRANSPARENCY."

U.C.'s flagship campus, sometimes known as Berserkely, embraces all that is exuberant, communal, self-serious, and radical. This battle was made for it. In late October, Berkeley students convened a daylong Mobilizing Conference to Save Public Education. They hoped to counter the belt-tightening ideas being considered by the U.C. Commission on the Future, which include increasing student-faculty ratios, making some degrees three-year programs, and even instituting "distance learning," or online education. More than eight hundred people filled Pauley Ballroom: students from colleges all over the state, union representatives, and public-school teachers and parents. The fiscal mess was general, a radiant ooze. It contaminated the entire California Master Plan for Education, the three-tiered system established in 1960 by Clark Kerr, then the U.C. president, to make higher education universally available as "the prime instrument of national purpose." U.C. took twenty-three hundred fewer students this year, and the Cal State system will take forty thousand fewer, so the excluded students are trickling down to community colleges—which had their own budgets cut by eight per cent. In San Diego this fall some eighteen thousand students were turned away altogether.

All morning at Pauley, people proposed direct actions. A student facilitator summarized each idea on a projection screen: "rolling strikes"; "nationalize all universities"; "socialist revolution"; "a tent city in Sacramento"; "create a shadow Board of Regents"; "occupy Wells Fargo bank in downtown Oakland"; "worker-student control of the university"; "strike

in March”; “act now, fuck March”; and “capitalism is bad.”

In the audience, Ananya Roy saw the verdict on capitalism and murmured, “That cliché will not get us anywhere.” Roy, a thirty-nine-year-old professor of City and Regional Planning who grew up in Calcutta, is one of Berkeley’s star teachers; this fall, some seven hundred students

enrolled in her Global Poverty course, and she had to turn away three hundred more. Unfailingly poised, she was wearing a knee-length blue dress that made her stand out from her T-shirted students and her bearded, sandal-wearing colleagues.



Ananya Roy, center, at the campus strike in November. Photograph by Ian Martin.

A facilitator named Luis Reyes, a volatile Berkeley senior with a serious case of bed head, led the crowd in a raucous call and response of “*Se puede? Sí, se puede.*,” the old United Farm Workers motto. Roy told me, “Is this going to be just about resolving this crisis, about restoring some money to the system—or is it about the gigantic structural change necessary for public education? We need not just to save the university but to transform it.” She mentioned that one of her students, Zac Taylor, was racing to graduate in three years. “Zac is one of the most brilliant students we’ve had in Urban Studies—and he may not be able to finish up next semester. He is the crunch on the middle class.” (As a third of student fees go toward scholarships, the poorest students may actually benefit from the proposed fee hikes, which would fall hardest on the middle class.) I’d met Tay-

lor, a wavy-haired young man whose idealism and veneration of Roy made me feel like Ebenezer Scrooge. He told me that he had only two dollars and eighteen cents in the bank and will be thirty-six thousand dollars in debt when he graduates, if he graduates. His mother and stepfather, salespeople for a chocolate shop and Verizon, respectively, earned a

little too much for him to be eligible for a Pell grant, but they’d just lost their house and bought a van as a fallback residence. “I’m of the generation of masochists,” Taylor said. “We’re used to the pain.” Roy, who is married but childless, mothers her charges like a broody, if pedagogic, hen. Last summer, she turned down a more lucrative offer from an Ivy League college to stay at Berkeley and stand up for public education. Yet even though she was scheduled to headline every major campus rally and teach-in that fall, she sometimes seemed more comfortable in the harbor of inquiry than on the seas of revolt. Roy was a stalwart of the faculty organization Save the University, but was only loosely affiliated with the more radical Solidarity Alliance, a coalition of union members, faculty, and students which organized the September 24th walkout at Berkeley. As the alliance worked to transform scattered protests into a hard-core movement, some of its members wondered if Roy would put her body on the line.

The mobilizing conference was being run by the General Assembly, a new stu-

dent organization without leaders. G.A. meetings often last for five hours or more, as issues of “critical representation” are thoroughly ventilated: is a strike a European tactic unsuited to students of color, who challenge the status quo simply by going to class? Zac Taylor told me, “We’re filled with frustration that we can’t seem to act as one body, that we can’t be this army with pitchforks who go burn something.” Yet Michael Cohen, a lecturer in American and African-American studies and the co-chair of Solidarity Alliance, observed the ragged proceedings in Pauley with approval. “The students are the masses; they bring the numbers and unimpeachable political and moral authority. The General Assembly—if it can keep from tearing itself apart—will be leading the movement in the next few months.”

The assembly nearly tore itself apart after lunch. The facilitators’ announcement that they would defer any discussion of demands to the next meeting provoked a cascade of boos, and, toward the end of the seven-hour discussion, the room erupted with shouts of “General strike! General strike!” Luis Reyes cried, “What is this, fucking preschool? Stop!” When it became obvious that the majority sentiment was for a strike and/or a march on March 4th, but that nine alternative days had still to be voted on, louder boos rang out. Reyes slumped in frustration, then raised his arms. “I know it’s tedious, people, but this is how we build a statewide movement. This is democracy. This is how we do it.”

Following the Mobilizing Conference, some hundred Berkeley students and members of AFSCME, the union that represents the campus’s custodians and food-service workers, took two buses into the Oakland Hills to the rented house of the U.C. president. In September, Mark Yudof had been quoted in the *Times Magazine* saying that “being president of the University of California is like being manager of a cemetery: there are many people under you, but no one is listening.” U.C. has two hundred and twenty-nine thousand students and a hundred and eighty thousand faculty and staff, and the corpse analogy infuriated many of them. It also provided protesters with a handy symbolic vocabulary. On this, the protesters’ eighth visit, the plan was to build a

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mock cemetery on Yudof's lawn. (The president had prudently gone out to dinner.) Campus police were blocking the driveway, so the protesters arranged their tombstones on a nearby hillside, chanting "Whose house? Our house!" as local TV crews filmed.

Yudof, a roundish sixty-five-year-old who swims a bit in his pin-striped suits, keeps a photo of his doppelgänger Winston Churchill on his desk. Like Churchill facing the Battle of Britain, he is digging in to fight: he has cut the notoriously bloated office of the president by thirty per cent and proposed that the federal government support public universities with a program as vigorous as the G.I. Bill. Yudof is by many accounts a skillful manager and a good listener, but his vision of the university falls something short of Churchillian. He told me that he sometimes imagines a Super Bowl commercial for higher ed: "It would start off with someone who woke up in the morning and said, 'Thank God for my pace-maker,' turned on the television set to watch some program in color, sat down and had his Wheaties and strawberries, then got in his car and put on his retractable seat belt"—all technologies that he maintained had been invented at American universities.

Lyne Hejninian, a Berkeley English professor who founded Solidarity Alliance, calls the U.C. president "obstructionist, imperious, and unapproachable." Others note that if Yudof, a longtime university administrator in Minnesota and Texas who has had the U.C. job only since 2008, didn't create the mess, he nonetheless epitomizes it. "You replace Yudof and you'll get another Yudof," Isaac Miller, an activist senior who helped erect the tombstones, said. "But he's such a perfect front man for making our case." After the students wound up their field trip, Yudof got an "all clear" call from the police and came home. He noticed the graveyard, he told me, but "I ignored it. You can protest, you can put up signs—at Berkeley they like to occupy trees and run nude—but the answer is *I still don't have any money.*"

The state of California, Yudof often observes, has become an "unreliable partner" in underwriting the next retractable seat belt. July's axe blow followed decades of whittling: in 1990, California contributed \$16,430 per U.C. student (in current

dollars); now it contributes just \$7,570. Dr. Harry Powell, the U.C. faculty's chief liaison to the Regents, said, "The legislators have told us, essentially, 'The student is your A.T.M. They're how you should balance the budget.'" Yudof told me he had to end the furloughs next May, and raise student fees correspondingly, or risk presiding over a mediocrity. "We tax Liz Blackburn"—the U.C. San Francisco researcher who recently won a Nobel Prize for chromosomal research—"too heavily, and, boy, do we have a problem if she leaves. I have to be very careful not to kill the golden geese."

Robert Birgeneau, Berkeley's gangly, staunchly liberal chancellor, told me, "I anticipated more enmity to us here on campus and less against Yudof. That enmity is totally misplaced." And Richard Blum, an influential regent who is married to Senator Dianne Feinstein, called criticism of Yudof "beyond ridiculous." Blum added, "If you tell me some union janitor doesn't understand it, O.K., but I don't understand why the *Berkeley faculty* doesn't understand that the problem is Sacramento." More philosophically, the longtime regent Odessa Johnson observed, "If Jesus Christ came down and raised the tuition, they'd stone his house, too."

In December of 1964, a twenty-one-year-old philosophy student named Mario Savio stood on the steps of Berkeley's Sproul Hall and gave the Free Speech Movement's most incendiary oration, lighting the fuse for the Vietnam protests to come. He looked, with his altar boy's forehead, like Art Garfunkel, but he lashed the crowd with the cadences of Bob Dylan: "You've got to put your bodies upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop." The Free Speech Movement's fight for the right to proselytize on campus for off-campus political organizations, particularly those which supported civil rights, was clean and quick. After some eight hundred students were arrested for occupying Sproul Hall, an overwhelming faculty vote in support of the students forced the administration to cave by early January.

Ironically, Savio's unruly language also helped elect Ronald Reagan governor of California, in 1966. Reagan campaigned on the promise to "clean up that mess in

THE THINGS

When I walk in my house I see pictures,
bought long ago, framed and hanging
—de Kooning, Arp, Laurencin, Henry Moore—
that I've cherished and stared at for years,
yet my eyes keep returning to the masters
of the trivial: a white stone perfectly round,
tiny lead models of baseball players, a cowbell,
a broken great-grandmother's rocker,
a dead dog's toy—valueless, unforgettable
detritus that my children will throw away
as I did my mother's souvenirs of trips
with my dead father, Kodaks of kittens,
and bundles of cards from her mother Kate.

—Donald Hall

Berkeley," a place that in his mind was "a hotbed of Communism and homosexuality." The Reagan Revolution secured its legacy only after Reagan left Sacramento, when voters passed the Proposition 13 ballot initiative, in 1978. Prop 13 capped property-assessment increases at two per cent a year, amended the state constitution to require a two-thirds majority of the legislature to raise taxes or pass a budget—and, in effect, broke the government. As a result of Prop 13, and later ballot initiatives that pre-allocate nearly ninety per cent of the state's funds, California's annual budget process has been marked for decades by blown deadlines, furloughs for public employees, and I.O.U.s for the state's creditors. The recession and the rout in the housing market made everything much worse. The state has cut its budget more than twenty billion dollars since 2008 and begun furloughing its employees three days a month—yet still expects to end this fiscal year another twenty-one billion dollars in debt.

Ananya Roy arrived at Berkeley as a graduate student in 1992, early in California's long slide. In Calcutta, her parents, a businessman and an exacting high-school English teacher, had raised her to question every unsupported premise, so she fit right in. After Roy earned a Ph.D. in City and Regional Planning, she joined Berkeley's faculty in 1999, was awarded tenure in 2006, won prestigious teaching awards—and, in the spring of 2009, got into her first scrap with the administra-

tion, resigning her associate deanship in International and Area Studies after the division lost its dean to budget cuts.

Then came this fall, when Berkeley's budget was reduced by \$148 million. Roy could see the squeeze everywhere: the sixty new faculty members hired in an ordinary year shrank to fewer than ten, and garbage was being taken out from offices only twice a month. Annie McClanahan, a graduate student in English, said that the budget for freshman composition had been pared such that "there's not a single instructor who doesn't have seventeen students in a class, ten on the wait list, plus five who are in tears because they can't get in."

Roy's students kept asking her how to make sense of it all. One afternoon, I met with eleven student leaders, eight of whom had taken or were taking Roy's class in Global Poverty. After several hours of wide-ranging conversation, they all agreed that the rhetoric and tactics of the Free Speech Movement were basically irrelevant to their fight. Ashoka Finley observed, "California is so different now—it's become like a developing country. We're being dealt with the same way the I.M.F. deals with its client countries, having our social services cut and being forced to exercise fiscal restraint." Carlo De La Cruz nodded and said, "We have to change the language of the university from an economic exchange into the language of public good." You no longer need a Weatherman to know which way the

wind blows: you need a meteorologist, an economist, a political scientist, a psychiatrist, a linguist, and a rabble-rouser.

With state support withering away, many divisions and departments of the university have felt increasing pressure to pay for themselves, either by attracting research grants or by raising corporate or private endowments; four years ago, a twelve-million-dollar gift turned Berkeley's poli-sci department into the Charles and Louise Travers Department of Political Science. Yet this approach, known as "privatization," can introduce outside agendas and limit academic freedom. It doesn't seem to disturb Harvard University that its medical school has three professorships in sleep medicine endowed by the sleep-medication manufacturers Cephalon, Respireonics, and Res-Med. But there was an outcry at Berkeley two years ago when the oil company BP promised the campus about three hundred million dollars for an Energy Biosciences Institute in exchange for significant controls over the research done there.

Another danger is that privatization can turn a university into a glorified trade school. Business programs and computer-science departments will attract wealthy supporters, but who will bankroll poetry? This concern is heightened because English—a high-enrollment, low-teaching-cost department—actually subsidizes disciplines such as nuclear physics and engineering, which require expensive equipment. Colleen Lye, a Berkeley English professor, says, "We have the No. 1-rated graduate department in the country"—according to the *U.S. News* survey—"yet our faculty and students feel second-class. For example, most humanities departments lost their phones this fall, while most science departments haven't."

As the semester began, Ananya Roy became uncomfortably aware that even as she denounced privatization she was serving as education director of Berkeley's Blum Center for Developing Economies, endowed by the regent Richard Blum, an investment banker. The center gave out a hundred thousand dollars in travel grants last summer and sent sixty students abroad, including Zac Taylor, who went to Nairobi; it also funds the Global Poverty and Practice minor—the most popular minor on campus—which Roy chairs. "The Blum Center is a wonderful oasis," Roy

told me. "But what good does it do if I can give one of my students a travel grant and he has to drop out because he can't afford the fees? What good is having built these programs if the institution one believes in is falling to pieces?"

One of Roy's favorite instructional concepts is the double agent: she encourages her students to think of themselves as actors complicit in large institutions—the World Bank, America, Berkeley—who can effect change from within, even while recognizing that "there are always compromises and betrayals." Worried that she'd been compromised by her own double role, she began to ask her students if she should resign from the center. Richard Blum told me he was perplexed by Roy's ambivalence: "If the university had said, 'Gee, Dick, we love your idea, but we don't want your thirty million dollars—we'll do it,' nothing would have made me happier. But if I didn't do it no one would. People accuse us of privatizing the university—I say, 'No, the state is privatizing the university.'"

Roy began to voice her students' dismay in sharp, sloganeering phrases, declaring, for instance, that they were threatened with a "subprime education." At a panel discussion on "The Crisis of Public Education," in late October, Roy framed the crisis in a new way. In her piping voice, she defined the "experience of generalized vulnerability and marginality that so many Americans and Californians now face" with a phrase she repeated, elegiacally: "We have all become students of color now." Heads dipped and swayed around the room.

The difficulties of translating compelling imagery into political change, and of coalition-building between seemingly natural allies, became apparent later in the panel discussion when Alberto Torrico, the majority leader of the state assembly, stood to speak. Torrico, a pugnacious Bay Area Democrat who was the first person in his family to attend college, said that he

was "pretty pissed off at all the students here" for not protesting when Governor Schwarzenegger began his series of cutbacks to higher education. Then he explained his cure-all: AB 656, a bill that would impose a 12.5-per-cent tax on California's oil. Torrico said that the resulting \$1.3 billion a year would go solely to higher education (assuming he can sweet-talk the necessary Republicans into supporting the measure). Mark Yudof has not endorsed AB 656: among his other concerns, he told me, was that only twenty-five per cent of the money would be earmarked for U.C., and that the legislature would establish another board above the Regents to allocate those funds. When I raised these reservations with Torrico, he said, "If I gave them a blank check, they'd use it for administrative costs instead of education. And on percentages I say, 'Do you want twenty-five per cent of a billion-plus, or one hundred per cent of nothing?' Cause I can give you *that* very easily."

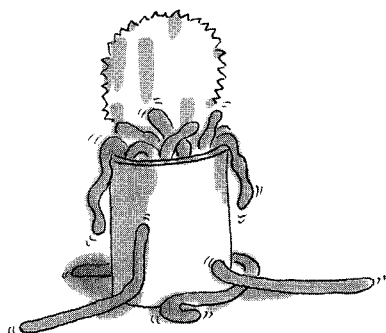
Throughout the early fall, the Berkeley administration deftly conveyed the impression that it had foreseen, condoned, and even authorized the rebellion. After the September walkout, Chancellor Robert Birgeneau and his executive vice-chancellor and provost, George Breslauer, e-mailed the community to say that "yesterday's protests exemplified the best of our tradition of effective civil action." Birgeneau, who had agitated for civil rights in South Carolina in the sixties, told me that the students "can occupy any space they like, that's fine. Unless they damage a building, in which case they're breaking the law and I'd send in the police." In October, just before three hundred students occupied the Anthropology Library for a Friday night "study-in" to protest the closure of department libraries on weekends, Breslauer privately assured a student ad-

viser that the police wouldn't step in.

I had coffee with some of the students who'd organized the study-in, and they seemed deflated by the administrators' judolike response: Birgeneau quickly turned to some wealthy Berkeley parents and raised eighty thousand dollars to keep the department libraries open. The students had hoped to stir outrage by being arrested, and they were disturbed that the ameliorating money came from private funds: that even libraries were no longer part of the university's core public mission. Callie Maidhof, a graduate student in anthropology, said, "Clearly, the only effective tactic thus far is direct action, and that won us only a partial success." Michael Cohen, the Solidarity Alliance co-chair, who was also at the table, said, "What does any victory for the left look like? You get what you want, but someone else takes credit for it. It's a victory that feels like a defeat."

Meanwhile, to preserve his own campus, Birgeneau was laying a course that would separate Berkeley from the U.C. fleet. He co-wrote a widely discussed op-ed for the *Washington Post* suggesting that leading public universities such as Berkeley and Rutgers could stay afloat if the federal government matched, at two to one, private endowment funds raised by the universities (and their respective states also kicked in at one to one). Because of state disinvestment, local politicians have suggested that such noted universities as Michigan and Virginia should be taken private; Birgeneau was angling, instead, to go federal. Unlike Yudof, though, he wasn't seeking federal money for all of U.C.: only about five of the ten campuses would be eligible under his proposal. Birgeneau acknowledged that this would disrupt the Master Plan, but said, "Here I don't mind being accused of elitism—I do believe the great research universities play a disproportionately important role in the country."

The chancellor also decided to gradually increase Berkeley's out-of-state enrollment from 9.5 to twenty per cent. Out-of-state students pay more than triple the in-state fees, and the admissions measure would eventually generate an extra sixty million dollars for the campus—while, of course, reducing access for Californians. The shift was popular with senior faculty, who had seen the furloughs increase the gap between their salaries and those at comparable private institutions



PAR-TAY!



from twenty-nine thousand dollars to forty-eight thousand. David Hollinger, a professor of history, pointed out, "We have to match salary offers from Harvard and Princeton, and Irvine doesn't. Let Berkeley go out on its own with a degree of privatization—it'll take pressure off the budget elsewhere."

Budget cuts catalyze self-interest. In June, twenty-two department chairs at U.C. San Diego signed a letter suggesting that, to save the University of California "as we know it," at least one of the less desirable campuses—Merced, Riverside, or Santa Cruz—should be closed. Berkeley's Wendy Brown, a professor of political science and a member of Save the University, acknowledged that such escape-hatch ideas put tremendous pressure on the protesters' unity. "On the horizon is the breakup of the University of California into different castes at different prices, which reinforces socioeconomic inequality at the level of educational access at a public entity that was designed to *redress* those inequalities." Ananya Roy told me, "On bad days, many of us wake up and think, Wouldn't it just be easier to save Berkeley?"

Birgeneau said he'd been able to predict the protesters' moves thus far, and he seemed confident that his flexibility and his Berkeley exceptionalism would placate students and faculty. Yet his contacts were chiefly with the student council and the Academic Senate—moderate organizations far from the heat of revolt. At a town-hall meeting on the crisis in early November, attended by many of the more radical students, Birgeneau advocated a system-wide march on Sacramento in March: "I hope that this will match the March on Washington, with literally hundreds of thousands of students." That idea met with favor, but the crowd's baseline hostility seemed to take him aback. During his opening remarks, Birgeneau slipped his glasses off and on fourteen times, as if he couldn't quite figure out where to look.

When Solidarity Alliance called for a three-day strike at Berkeley to coincide with the Regents meeting in November, the heads of the major local unions endorsed the call, as did Berkeley's student council. But many faculty members were torn. Wendy Brown decided not to cross the picket line to teach her undergraduate course in modern political

theory, but said, "To cancel a class in the name of saving education feels like a colossal contradiction." Robert Reich, the former Secretary of Labor, who is now a professor of public policy at Berkeley, also said he would respect the strike, but wondered, "Who are we striking against? The chancellor? The president? The regents? The legislature? The governor? The people of California? Ourselves?" The administration also hardened its line. Birgeneau told me, "The one-day strike was an appropriate reaction to frustration. Three days is three days, and it's not as if there's something new to say."

After consulting with her students, Ananya Roy decided to honor the strike and cancel that Thursday's lecture. She also became a full-fledged member of Solidarity Alliance. On November 18th, the first day of the strike, she was the alliance's lead speaker at a rally on Sproul Plaza. Her tone was conversational, her remarks blunt: "You know what angers me? That the U.C. top guys are cavalier. 'It is the state,' they say, shrug, and walk away." She continued, "Since September 24th, we have been doing the job of U.C. administrators for them. Workers, students, faculty—we have made visible the cause of public education." The Berkeley senior Isaac Miller told me, "Ananya was phenomenal. She made it very clear that it was our responsibility to seize this moment." Michael Cohen said, "Ananya went from being one of the most articulate voices in the movement to being the faculty's *most* important voice."

That same day, the Regents' Finance Committee met on the U.C.L.A. campus for a last discussion of the fee hikes, while outside the building five hundred students and union activists threw sticks and bottles at policemen in riot gear, who Tasered two of them. The following day, the full Board of Regents approved the new fees—and protesters promptly surrounded the building and held them prisoner for ninety minutes.

Mark Yudof told me he would now go to Sacramento. "We're going to fight like hell to get nine hundred million back in our budget, which is the minimum needed to avoid further cuts." He added, "We actually need two *billion* to get back to where we were in 1990, but . . ." He shrugged. H. D. Palmer, the deputy director of California's Department of Finance, says, "The Governor *wants* to invest in public

education," but adds that the state's huge deficit may well prevent that; the Regents, for their part, already expect to have to raise fees again. When I asked Yudof whether he planned to harness the students' energies in his campaign, he said, "I want to be shoulder to shoulder with them, and, if that means marching with them in Sacramento, probably so. If they're naked," he added, with a faint smile, "probably not."

The students didn't wait for Yudof's *démarche*. They had decided that a vital constituent of a University of California education is fighting for a University of California education. The day of the vote, students at U.C.L.A. occupied a building; and the next day students at Davis, Santa Cruz, and Berkeley followed suit. At Berkeley, forty protesters gathered at Wheeler Hall at 5:30 A.M. and barricaded themselves in on the second floor, then hung a sheet out the window that said "32 percent hike, 900 layoffs," next to the word "CLASS" with a slash through it. It was unclear whether "CLASS" referred to the hundred and eighteen courses at Wheeler that would be cancelled that day, to socioeconomic status, or to an ideal of behavior. One student with a scarf wrapped around his head, *mujahideen* style, thrust a bullhorn out a window and announced, "This isn't your sixties Berkeley sit-in." The protesters inside, most of them undergraduates, were an "occupationist" group that had come together the previous day. Some didn't even know one another's names.

Campus police encircled the building, and soon hundreds of students were at the barricades, many of them drawn there because protesters pulled fifty fire alarms in nearby buildings—and others by Robert Birgeneau's e-mails warning everyone to stay away. The campus police called for backup from the Berkeley and Oakland police departments and the Alameda County Sheriff's Office.

Ananya Roy arrived at 11:30 A.M. and helped other teachers link arms and form a wall between the police and the students. It was unclear who was in charge, either inside or outside. Michael Cohen told me, "The people on the inside expected those of us on the outside—whom they hadn't consulted—to do all the work, getting people there and then keeping them from rioting. They hadn't empowered a negotiating team, so we

had to figure out who they would trust, and Ananya seemed like she could be the person.” Roy took a call from some of the occupiers, who asked if she and other faculty would convey their demands to the administration. Roy said she would. The first demands, which were broadcast on the bullhorn and also disseminated via Twitter, were that the university rehire thirty-eight custodians that it had laid off and grant amnesty to the occupiers.

But no one could reach Birgeneau or George Breslauer—their office lines were overloaded with calls—and California Hall, where the administrators worked, was locked tight. A cold rain began to fall, and as the students outside shivered and stamped their feet rumors circulated of a mass attack on the barricades at 1 P.M. Roy’s colleague Peter Glazer used his iPhone to tap out a hasty message to the Listserv of politically active faculty: “Where istha. Administration. Please help. Contact admn. Violence mminent.” At about that moment, Richard Blum called Roy. The regent was unaware of the occupation, and wanted to remonstrate with her about an editorial, which she and other Solidarity Alliance members had published in Berkeley’s *Daily Californian*, that called Yudof “a deep embarrassment to our University and public higher education.” Standing by a cordon of police in riot gear, Roy lost her famous composure and screamed, “You don’t want to be talking to me about Mark Yudof *now!*”

Skirmishes kept breaking out as groups of students, in a crowd now grown to some two thousand, surged toward the stanchions. Police lashed the wall of bodies with their batons and fired pellet guns, and the demonstrators began to chant “Shame on you!” Zac Taylor called it “the most difficult day for me as a Berkeley student.” Luis Reyes, the G.A. mainstay, observed, “The fact that the administration, which said, ‘Oh, we’re on your side,’ then sent in the riot police to break skulls showed a lot of students why we’re targeting U.C. as well as Sacramento.”

Birgeneau and Breslauer were actually in their offices, washed by the roars from across the way as they deployed a vice-chancellor and the dean of students to Wheeler and tried to ascertain whether the occupiers were students or “outsiders.” Breslauer later told me that he and Birgeneau were always reachable by their vice-chancellor and dean on the scene, “though

we did not answer all the appeals from individual faculty. Some may call that lack of leadership; others call it prudent.” (Both were upset when they learned later about episodes of police violence.)

After the vice-chancellor, Harry Le Grande, arrived at Wheeler, he and Roy and two other negotiators went into the building. But the occupiers would speak to them only on the phone, through a barricaded door, and after ninety minutes the discussions fell apart. Roy went outside and called me, leaving a voice mail “from the front lines.” She sounded both exhilarated and anxious: the police were about to go in. “Birgeneau and Breslauer are hiding out and missing in action. It’s pouring,” she concluded, signing off, “It’s just quite, quite something . . .” A few minutes later, the occupiers’ Twitter account reported, “The SWAT team is coming in. They are hammering the hinges off as I type.” Within minutes, all the occupiers, who’d retreated to a single classroom and piled chairs against the door, were wearing plastic handcuffs. But how were the police going to get them out?

Roy and a half-dozen other faculty and student-council members ran to California Hall and were finally able to meet with Birgeneau and Breslauer. “We just focussed on, How can we avoid one of the worst riots in Berkeley history?” Roy told me. Birgeneau says that it was Roy’s and other faculty members’ accounts of police violence and the crowd’s mood that made him decide not to try to herd the occupiers into police vans but simply to cite them for trespassing and release them.

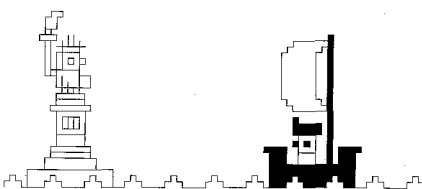
Roy and three other observers went back into Wheeler to escort the arrested students out into the night and the embrace of the roaring crowd. On finally meeting the occupiers, Roy recognized five students from her class—and discovered that she didn’t know precisely how she felt about seeing them there. Part of her, the administrator part, was troubled by their recklessness.

Later that evening, as footage of the occupation played on CNN and YouTube, many of Roy’s students called or e-mailed

to thank her for helping to avert a much more violent outcome. Others were hostile. “Some sections of the crowd felt I’d sold out by going inside to impose a deal for the administration,” Roy told me afterward, sounding weary and stunned. “That’s not the case, but I knew the second time I went in that I could be seen as diluting the effect of student action. I was just worried about their safety.” Callie Maidhof, the anthropology student I’d spoken to earlier about the library study-in, was the occupiers’ media representative. She told me that a number of the occupiers believed that Roy’s actions, though well intentioned, were self-aggrandizing and paternalistic. “It was the crowd and the threat they posed that kept the occupiers from being taken downtown, not Ananya Roy and the administration. At this point, the students have realized that the administration is an unreliable partner.”

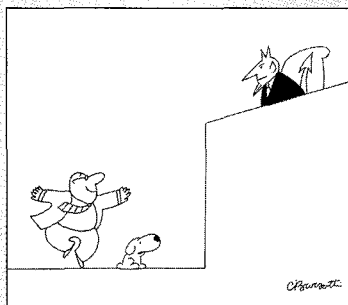
“What does solidarity mean?” Roy asked. “The students felt we faculty were breaching it because we were trying to soften the blows. But we felt we were demonstrating solidarity, because they *hadn’t* thought through what might happen, the risks.” She added, “Still, I love it when my students throw my words back at me. I tell them I wouldn’t want them to act as if they speak for or represent the poor—and now they’re telling me the same thing. So in one day I went from being the radical professor leading the strike to being accused of moderation. And that’s . . .” She laughed. As a double agent, she’d been blown. “Well, it’s . . . fantastic.”

When I spoke to Birgeneau, a few days later, he said, “It’s very easy to over-respond to noisy students, because they’re the ones you hear.” But, he said, he was no longer certain how events would play out. On December 11th, the administration again sent in the police, arresting sixty-six protesters who had occupied Wheeler for four days during study week. At eleven o’clock that night, more than forty people carrying torches marched on Birgeneau’s residence, where the chancellor was sleeping. A handful of the protesters smashed the outdoor lights and threw cement planters and burning torches at the house, scattering only after the chancellor’s wife, who was writing Christmas cards, woke her husband and he called the police. Mario Savio was long gone, but risen again were the rebel students and the flailing nightsticks, the days of rage. ♦



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SHOUTS & MURMURS

2009: THE QUIZ

BY PAUL SLANSKY

1. What decision by President Obama got Russell Wiseman, the mayor of Arlington, Tennessee, so upset that he vented about it on Facebook?

(a) Not to fight for a public option in the health-care-reform bill.

(b) To wave a light sabre around like a "Star Wars" geek.

(c) Not to let the White House social secretary, Desirée Rogers, testify about the couple who crashed the state dinner.

(d) Not to join the hundred and fifty-plus countries that have signed an international treaty banning land mines.

(e) To call on bloggers at press conferences.

(f) Not to prosecute Bush Administration officials for devising torture policies.

(g) To announce his escalation of the war in Afghanistan at exactly the moment that ABC would otherwise have broadcast "A Charlie Brown Christmas."

2. Three of these statements are true. Which one is false?

(a) At the height of the controversy about Obama's citizenship, Tom DeLay asked Chris Matthews, "Will you ask the President to show me his gift certificate?"

(b) Before he went to prison to live with a stranger in a forty-five-square-foot room, while he was still under house arrest in his four-thousand-square-foot penthouse Bernard Madoff complained, "I can't go anywhere! I'm stuck here all day!"

(c) Wolf Blitzer won big on celebrity "Jeopardy!"

(d) Senator Joe Lieberman (I.-Connecticut) explained that one of the main reasons he decided to oppose the Medicare buy-in was that liberals seemed to like it even better than the public option.

3. Which three of these statements describe Representative Virginia Foxx (R.-North Carolina) and which three describe Representative Michele Bachmann (R.-Minnesota)?

(a) She claimed that the notion that Matthew Shepard was killed because he

was gay was a "hoax" being used as an excuse to pass hate-crimes legislation.

(b) She said, "Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on you."

(c) She said, "I find it interesting that it was back in the nineteen-seventies that the swine flu broke out then under another Democrat President, Jimmy Carter. And I'm not blaming this on President Obama; I just think it's an interesting coincidence."

(d) She said to the chairman of the Republican National Committee, "Michael Steele! You be da man! You be da man!"

(e) She said that Americans had more to fear from the passage of health-care reform "than we do from any terrorist right now in any country."

(f) She warned that America is "running out of rich people."

Who did what?

4. Jimmy Carter.

5. Meghan McCain.

6. G. Gordon Liddy.

7. Timothy Geithner.

8. Carrie Prejean.

(a) Said of the Supreme Court nominee Sonia Sotomayor, "Let's hope that the key conferences aren't when she's menstruating or something."

(b) Told Rod Blagojevich, "You definitely must feel like you didn't do anything wrong, I mean, to write a book and whatever, like, that's how secure you are..."

(c) Said that Kanye West's ruining Taylor Swift's moment at the MTV Video Music Awards was "completely uncalled for" and "his punishment was to appear on the new Jay Leno show."

(d) Flew coach.

(e) Became famous for opposing gay marriage, then became more famous for having made a masturbation sex tape.

9. Three of these statements are true. Which one is false?

(a) A Fox News map of the Middle East labelled Iraq "Egypt."

(b) Bill Gates released mosquitoes into the audience at the TED conference and

said, "Not only poor people should experience this."

(c) When Senator David Vitter (R-Louisiana) tried to intimidate an airline employee into letting him on a flight that he was late for by using the "Do you know who I am?" routine, she replied, "Yes, I do. You're that senator whose name turned up in the phone books of two madams."

(d) After watching a tape of his guest Michael Moore singing "The Times They Are A-Changin'," Larry King asked him if he wrote the song.

Who's who?

10. Louis Caldera.
11. Lloyd Blankfein.
12. Justin Barrett.
13. Allen Stanford.
14. Jefferson Sessions.
15. James Inhofe.

(a) The Boston police officer who sent a mass e-mail referring to Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as a "banana-eating jungle monkey," and then said, "I am not a racist."

(b) The bank C.E.O. who said that his company is "doing God's work."

(c) The financier charged with "massive ongoing fraud" who explained, "I flew around in a private jet, I had a boat, but I always lived very frugally."

(d) The White House official who approved the buzzing of lower Manhattan by two F-16 fighter jets.

(e) The Oklahoma senator who said, "If global warming really exists, explain that to the people of Oklahoma. We had the largest snowstorm in the history of Marches three days ago."

(f) The Alabama senator who suggested that Guantánamo was really a nice place, because of the "tropical breezes."

16. Who is Conrad Murray?

(a) The health-care-reform protester who brandished a copy of what he called "the U.S.S. Constitution."

(b) The doctor who administered Michael Jackson's last propofol shot.

(c) The Baltimore mayor who was convicted of taking gift cards intended for poor children and using them to buy, among other electronics, an Xbox.

(d) The Texas legislator who suggested that voters of Asian descent should adopt names that are "easier for Americans to deal with."

(e) The Missouri legislator who suggested that a food program for low-

income children was expendable, because "hunger can be a positive motivator."

17. Whose lawyer said, "The transition from being free to being incarcerated is very difficult for him."

- (a) Bernard Kerik's.
- (b) The Craigslist Killer's.
- (c) Roman Polanski's.
- (d) Phil Spector's.

Who said what about President Obama?

18. Rush Limbaugh.
19. Glenn Beck.
20. Pastor Steven Anderson.
21. Arianna Huffington.
22. Paul Krugman.
23. Joan Rivers.

(a) "I hope he fails."

(b) "This President I think has exposed himself as a guy over and over and over again who has a deep-seated hatred for white people. . . . This guy is, I believe, a racist."

(c) "I think he should have pinned the ears back years ago. They really annoy me."

(d) "I hate Barack Obama. . . . God wants me to hate Barack Obama. . . . God hates Barack Obama."

(e) "Obama, by pursuing a uniformly pro-banker policy without even a gesture to popular anger over the bailouts, has ceded populist energy to the right and demoralized the movement that brought him to power."

(f) "How did the candidate who told a stadium of supporters in Denver that 'the greatest risk we can take is to try the same old politics with the same old players and expect a different result' become the President who has surrounded himself with the same old players trying the same old politics, expecting a different result?"

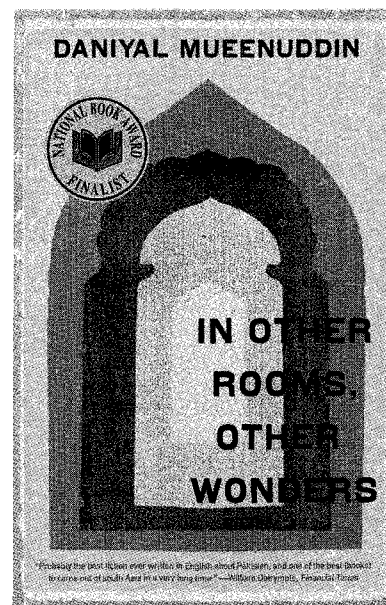
24. According to a Marist poll, what word or phrase was ranked the most annoying this year?

- (a) "Death panel." (f) "Teabagging."
- (b) "Unfriend." (g) "Whatever."
- (c) "Birther." (h) "Beer summit."
- (d) "Tweeted." (i) "Balloon boy."
- (e) "Octomom." (j) "Going rogue."

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Answers: (1) g, (2) c, (3) f, (4) c, (5) b, (6) c, (7) d, (8) c, (9) b, (10) d, (11) b, (12) a, (13) c, (14) f, (15) c, (16) b, (17) d, (18) c, (19) b, (20) c, (21) a, (22) c, (23) c, (24) e.

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

SCHOOL OF ROCK

Vampire Weekend goes West.

BY LIZZIE WIDDICOMBE



From left: Batmanglij, Baio, Koenig, and Tomson. Photograph by Steve Pyke.

One night in November, the four members of the New York band Vampire Weekend were sitting in the kitchen of a rented house in the Hollywood Hills, meditating on their surroundings. They were a few months away from the release of their second album, “Contra,” and, because the album has a California theme, they’d decided to spend a few weeks in the state, playing small venues like skate parks, where they could get used to performing the new songs and study up on West Coast culture. Chris Tomson, the band’s drummer, said that California had “loomed large” on previous tours: “If you’re based on the East Coast, you’re either heading toward it or away from it.” The band members live in Brooklyn, but they

have a big California fan base. Vampire Weekend is known for being a cerebral college band—it formed when the members were students at Columbia University—and for being unabashed about it. They approached their West Coast excursion with the diligence of foreign-exchange students, reading books on their destination, such as Bret Easton Ellis’s “Less Than Zero” and David Rieff’s “Los Angeles: Capital of the Third World.” Ezra Koenig, the lead singer and lyricist, is a researcher: anticipating that interviewers would grill him about whether “Contra” is a commentary on the Sandinistas—it’s not—he read up on the subject.

The band first gained a following in 2007, when songs from a self-produced

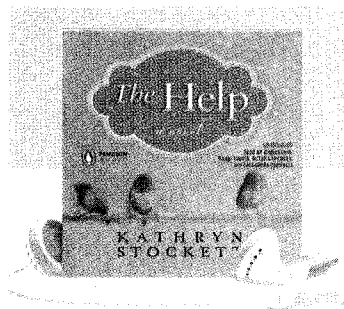
CD circulated on the Internet. Their music is the opposite of what the name suggests: it’s a cheery fusion of British New Wave and West African guitar pop. Instead of sounding strummy and raw, in the recent indie fashion, it sounds spare and polished—African rhythms, bright, undistorted guitar melodies, and twinkly Yamaha keyboard flourishes. (Comparisons were made with eighties bands like Talking Heads and Orange Juice and, especially, with Paul Simon’s “Graceland.”) Their first album, “Vampire Weekend,” has a lightness that can be unnerving to hard-line rock enthusiasts—it’s sometimes disparaged as barbecue background music—but it also has a conquering charm: you can play it for anyone. In 2007, Vampire Weekend signed with the independent British label XL, and the album—their own recordings, remixed—sold nearly half a million copies in the U.S., and went platinum in the U.K. The album was hailed both by severely hip music Web sites like Pitchfork and Stereogum and by NPR, which included “Vampire Weekend” on its list of Best African Music of 2008.

If the group became popular for its music, attention soon drifted to its over-all aesthetic: the incongruity of four upper-middle-class boys—Koenig, Tomson, Rostam Batmanglij, and Chris Baio—channeling Third World musical traditions. Their songs, which had titles like “Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa,” made allusions to a privileged world (“Crack your smile/Adjust my tie/Know your butler, unlike other guys”) and glib cultural tourism (“His Honor drove southward seeking exotica/Down to the Pueblo huts of New Mexico”). Over African rhythms, Koenig sang lines that could have been used in an S.A.T.-prep course (“Ion displacement won’t work in the basement”).

Not everyone was amused. “Koenig is hardly following in the footsteps of J. D. Salinger, John Updike or John Irving by illuminating the profound emptiness hiding behind the cheerfully privileged façade; he is celebrating the superficialities,” Jim DeRogatis wrote in the Chicago *Sun-Times*. It didn’t help that the band members called their sound “Upper West Side Soweto” on their MySpace page and dressed like the characters in their songs. They shot one video on a

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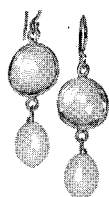
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yacht and another wearing pastel sweaters. The *Times* chronicled them discussing a shopping trip to Lacoste. The effect was arch: Rudyard Kipling as a rock band.

Many of the personas of rock music—punk rebel, sexual deviant—have lost their power to shock. But the effete, collegiate image projected by Vampire Weekend proved capable of offending in a fresh way. "Their aggressive preppiness rubs people the wrong way," Scott Plagenhoef, the editor of Pitchfork, told me. In the tradition of Kanye West in the rap world and Sean Avery in the N.H.L., success plus dandyishness equalled rancor. When Vampire Weekend's first album was released, the *Village Voice* ran "pro" and "con" articles instead of a single review. (Pro: "an album of subtle rebellion." Con: "VW's music, lyrically and sonically, emits the putrescent stench of old money, of old politics, of old-guard high society.") In the comments sections of music blogs, Vampire Weekend is often cast as a band of rich kids, avatars of bourgeois lameness. For instance: "This is what people who host home decorating shows listen to on the drive to work"; "It's like the Whiffenpoofs started a ska band."

The band members say they are surprised to be accused of being so calculating. Batmanglij, the band's keyboardist and producer, justified their lyrics with the write-what-you-know defense. "I remember when Ezra first played me this song he'd written with the lyrics 'Who gives a fuck about an Oxford comma?,'" he said. "He had just discovered this Facebook group called Society for the Preservation of the Oxford Comma."

Vampire Weekend is now popular enough to fill large venues (this month, they will play at the United Palace, in New York, which seats more than three thousand) and to travel with an entourage—tech guys, roadies, merchandise sellers. There were four other people at the Hollywood Hills house when I got there: Brian Cross, the band's tour manager (a former tour manager for Barbra Streisand), and a three-person film crew, headed by a rumpled-looking director named Carlos Charlie Perez. The record label had hired Perez to make a documentary about the tour. When I arrived, he was filming them sitting around a

long table: Koenig, who has dark hair and an angular face, has a professorial air (after graduation, he taught English for a year at a public school in Bedford-Stuyvesant); Batmanglij has a smilier, spacier countenance and is short and roly-poly; Tomson looks like a jock, but got the best grades in college; the bassist, Baio, is twenty-five, and graduated a year later than the others.

The band was filming introductions for an MTV "Hitlist": a roll call of music videos they'd chosen from a network-approved list.

Perez said, "Rolling Ezra," and Koenig leaned over the table and ad-libbed, using an MTV script: "Hey! Glad you're sticking around! We're Vampire Weekend, continuing to burn through our Hitlist. This last one is by a band called Cobra Starship, who have a name very similar to Vampire Weekend in that it's kind of two weird things stuck together."

Perez said "Cut," and there was some sniggering about the script. (No eye-rolling about the song, though: "A good pop record is something we can all get behind," Tomson said.) Batmanglij went next, plugging "Party in the U.S.A.," by Miley Cyrus: "Maybe one of the biggest hits of 2009!"

When Vampire Weekend started touring, more than two years ago, they travelled in the time-honored manner of struggling rock bands, schlepping equipment from gig to gig. "I packed the van," Tomson said. "I had the spatial reasoning necessary to fit all the stuff."

Batmanglij said, "I'd burn mixes, and if we were late I was called in to drive fast and not get caught by the cops."

Now, Koenig said, "those roles have mostly faded." Life on tour is quiet: they ride in a bus and sleep in hotels. Their rooms in the rented house contained books (Baio: "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls"; Tomson: "Run River," by Joan Didion—"I love a good Joan D.," he said) and discarded Halloween costumes. Tomson had been Ace Ventura.

There can be something frustrating in Vampire Weekend's blend of irony and sincerity. Yet there's a transparency about them: they're not straight-A types who would wear ripped jeans to fit in; they wouldn't pretend to be jaded about their

California adventure. Of the preppy clothes, Batmanglij said, "It's kind of just how we dress." He added that they'd hoped to project a vaguely retro look on-stage. "But it's important to note that we never overdid it. It's not like we dressed in blue blazers and—"

"Cricket outfits," Tomson said.

The band members' actual backgrounds could be described as upper-middle class. Koenig is Jewish and grew up in Glen Ridge, New Jersey. His mother is a family therapist; his father works as a movie-set dresser. Koenig went to Glen Ridge High School, where he played saxophone and was the drum major of the marching band. Batmanglij grew up in D.C., the son of Iranian immigrants who ended up in Georgetown, via France. He went to the Potomac School, a private school in Virginia. His mother, Najmieh Batmanglij, is an authority on Persian cooking.

Batmanglij met Koenig at a party during their freshman year at Columbia, but they bonded when they were both cast as night watchmen in a production of "Romeo and Juliet."

"No. 1 and No. 2," Koenig recalled. "You just come in at the end and have a few lines."

Batmanglij recited his lines: "The ground is bloody! Look about the courtyard!"

Batmanglij, a music major, took classes in composition, and after college he wrote film scores. He has always been a ProTools buff—in high school and in college, he spent hours on his computer, recording, sampling, and mixing songs. Koenig was an experienced songwriter by the time he met Batmanglij, having performed in a succession of bands with Wes Miles, who is now the lead singer of the band Ra Ra Riot. On a typical afternoon, Miles recalled, "Ezra would be, like, 'Let's try and write eight songs.' He'd come up with a guitar groove, and I'd put drums on it. Ezra would write lyrics freestyle and come up with a brilliant concept, and we'd have a song by the end of the afternoon." They recorded more than a hundred songs in two years. Koenig's lyrics were often inspired by objects found in Miles's basement. At Columbia, Koenig studied English, but his main activity was performing on campus in a rap duo called L'Homme Run. Their biggest hit, "Pizza Party,"

was about smoking blunts and eating calzones.

In his sophomore year, Koenig took a class called Imperialism and the Cryptographic Imagination, taught by Gauri Viswanathan. The class read Kipling's "Kim" and, Koenig said, talked about "the ways that relationships between imperial powers and colonized peoples could involve lots of codes." He liked the cryptography class so much that he took another postcolonial literature class, Plagiarism, Parody, and Postcolonialism, which examined the works of African novelists who'd been accused of plagiarism by British and French literary critics.

Koenig says that after taking Viswanathan's class he got interested in the semiotics of preppy clothes, and he has since read books about the Victorian textile trade. At the house in L.A., he talked about imperialism and the origin of madras plaid. "I realized that, even for Waspy American kids, the look is rooted in the connection between England and India. It made it more interesting to me," he said. "Then you get into stuff like Ralph Lauren being the son of Russian Jewish immigrants. So instead of representing one ethnic group or class, preppy style really is this incredibly mixed-up global thing."

During his senior year, Koenig put together a collection of short stories, called "Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa," for a creative-writing class. Many of the stories are no more than two pages, and they have cryptic titles: "Cruel Professor," "Neon Reggae Sunsplash." They later supplied lyrics for many Vampire Weekend songs. The stories tend to involve clothes, music, and some wistful evocation of a calm, privileged world that is shaken by realizations about grim historical realities in places like Africa. The title story is about a girl named Jennifer who goes to Cornell and whose mother has died of cancer. Its narrator recalls a trip that Jennifer and her mother took to Cape Cod—"She is wear-

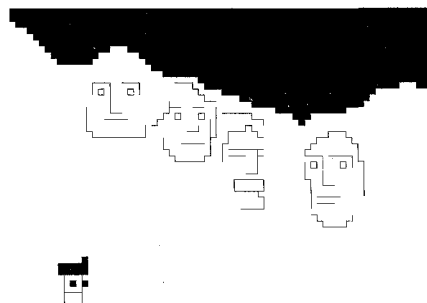
ing khaki shorts and a wide-brimmed hat like an old-time safari wife. You are dressed in the United Colors of Benetton. It is 1988." The title comes from a memory Jennifer has of driving around with her mother while listening to Paul Simon's "Graceland."

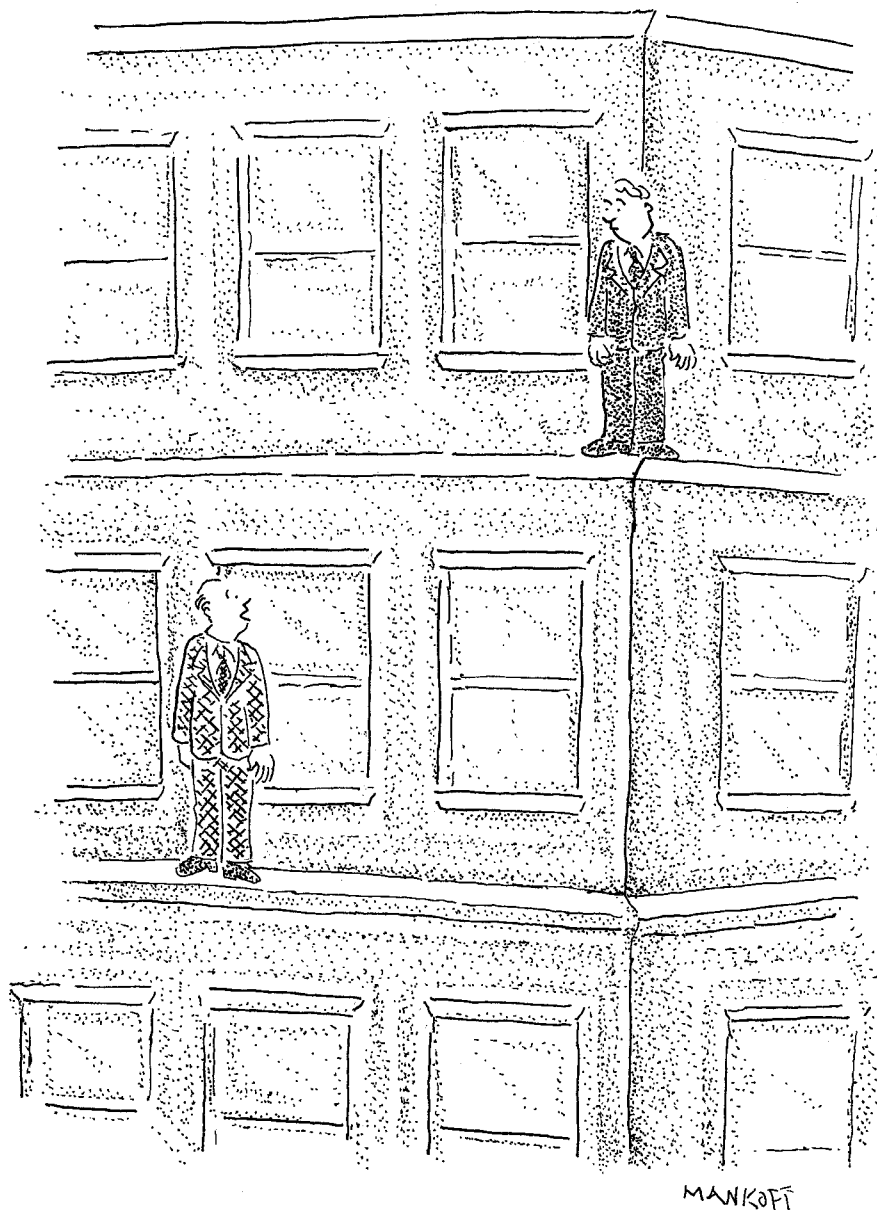
Caleb Crain, a former adjunct professor at Columbia, taught Koenig in a Melville class, and read Koenig's stories; he later became one of the first people to blog about his music. Crain said the stories "read as if Lydia Davis, with her oblique and hermetic sense of humor, were working with F. Scott Fitzgerald's material." One transition: "Garfunkel's blond fro slowly becomes the mid-day sun and we are back in Wellfleet."

The band does not like to talk about Paul Simon, having heard too much about its debt to "Graceland." In its version of the story, an interest in African music was percolating, separately, among them all: Batmanglij had been listening to Brenda Fassie and Angélique Kidjo; Koenig had bought a compilation of pop music from Madagascar. He said, "A lot of music from Madagascar is a fusion of things. There's even influence from British music, because a lot of pirates live there or set up colonies on Madagascar, so there's a lot of accordion." He was listening to Madagascan accordion songs when he came up with a riff for "Cape Cod Kwassa Kwassa."

One afternoon, Tomson and Baio got into a white van and were driven to Bakersfield, where Vampire Weekend was scheduled to play a club called Chenchos. Koenig and Batmanglij would meet them there. Tomson, a former guitar player, became a drummer because the band needed one, and his drumming evokes guitar-playing: textured, rather than evenly rhythmic. Baio, the bass player, met Koenig through one of the Montague boys in "Romeo and Juliet." In the van, Tomson played Sudoku, and Baio read "Snow," by Orhan Pamuk. Tomson asked the driver, "Can we stop at Whole Foods?" He and Baio got out to buy pizza and almonds.

The van passed through misty mountains and into farm country, and eventually pulled up outside Chenchos, a warehouse whose interior was shaped like a two-lane bowling alley, with purple walls, black floors, two stripper poles, and a large mirror. Next to one of the





"Oh, fine, thanks. And yourself?"

stripper poles was a folding table, which displayed food requested in the band's rider: hummus, vegetables, Red Stripe beer, diet Dr Pepper. Tomson sat in a metal chair and read his *Didion*.

Koenig and Batmanglij arrived, and the band did a run-through of some new songs: "Cousins"—a punky song with a polka sound that feels wilder than the songs on their first album—and "Horchata," a joyful, plonky tune that uses Brazilian percussion and a marimba. Batmanglij's producing method is to record each instrument separately, starting with the drums, and then build the song, piece by piece, on his computer. He likes layered vocals, and on the new album he em-

ployed more sonic effects—synthesizers, Auto-Tune. Koenig's voice is also more of a focus, sounding dreamy and soft sometimes, and at other moments breaking into unpredictable yelps and falsetto, like a deranged yodeller.

The new album retains the "world music" vibe that rankles the band's critics. Ryan Schreiber, the founder of Pitchfork, wrote in an e-mail, "The image they project is practically 'The Darjeeling Limited' brothers of indie rock bands—globe-trotting sons of distinguished men clumsily exploring distant cultures, despite only being passively, naïvely invested." On the subject of authenticity, Koenig said, "For people who think that Vampire Weekend

is making music that's inauthentic to us, the question is 'What *is* authentic to us?' Is it the Rolling Stones—some version of black Southern music?" He added, "There are probably a lot better reasons why you could say we're not good."

The documentary involved having the members of Vampire Weekend interview what Koenig called "iconic California musicians." One of the people they interviewed was Tom DeLonge, the lead singer of the pop-punk band Blink-182, which had its flash point of popularity in the nineties. Early one morning, they stopped, with the camera crew, in an office park off the freeway. A woman holding a Chihuahua answered the door, and led the band and the film crew into a lobby decorated with green Chinese dragon sculptures. They went into a garagelike room—DeLonge's rehearsal space—with artificial turf for carpet and a chandelier in a plastic box hanging from the ceiling. There was a "guitar boat" from a recent tour, with a set list taped to it: "Dumpweed," "Feeling This," "Rock Show," "What's My Age Again?"

"It's so hit-filled," Tomson said, admiringly.

DeLonge came in, wearing jeans and a short-sleeved gray T-shirt over a long-sleeved white T-shirt. "Is this the whole band?" he asked. "Is this Vampire Weekend? You guys do quality shit. I'm stealing a lot of your stuff." DeLonge, too, was being followed by a camera crew. "This is a Blink documentary we're making," he said. "It's a Blinkumentary."

They sat on a couch, and the Vampire Weekend members took turns asking questions. Both camera crews filmed the proceedings. At one point, DeLonge said, "One of the things that I always wondered, when you have some success as a musician, is, How the fuck did that happen? What am I doing that people like?"

After the interview, he led the band into a conference room with a flat-screen TV and launched into a long pitch for an Internet project he was working on—"a prepackaged Web site" for bands, called Modlife. "I term it an 'operating system,'" DeLonge said. "You could sell music, you could sell movies, you could sell advance tickets, you could do advertising, you could do automated V.I.P. parties. We're gonna be putting in live auctions, e-commerce." He continued, "We're doing it

with the White Stripes." He said Vampire Weekend could do all of its business through Modlife, with the Web site taking twenty-five per cent of the profits. He demonstrated a video chat-room function by talking to a group of his fans: "Hey, everybody, I'm doing a demonstration with Vampire Weekend. If you want Vampire Weekend to be on Modlife, say 'Yes!'" The chat-room users started responding: "Yes!" "Yes!" "Yes!" One wrote, "No!"

DeLonge ignored it, and talked about video blogging: "Do you want to do normal blogs—or do you want to do it in the dark and have lasers going and make it look like you're from space? And not call it a blog, call it a space cam?" He asked, "What have you guys been doing for a Web site?"

"Three out of four of us are on Twitter," Batmanglij said.

DeLonge shook his head. "I don't want to be freaking on the money part," he said. "But you guys know and I know that you're trying to live in an industry that's dying. And so Modlife is trying to give you the chance to survive." Then he screened a trailer for a movie that his new band, Angels & Airwaves, had produced, called "Love"—images of an astronaut in a space station over swelling music.

Batmanglij started giggling, and DeLonge turned and looked at him.

"Uh, I just thought of something fun that we could do with our band," he said.

"That's rad," DeLonge said evenly. "Cool."

The Vampire Weekend members got up to leave. DeLonge shook their hands and said, "Consider this stuff." Then he asked, "Why are you guys so mellow?"

They drove out of the office park and past some strip malls. Green Day was playing on the radio. The band members seemed rattled.

"I started thinking about all kinds of things while he was talking," Batmanglij said. "Like what it means to be in a band. Tom DeLonge is not that old. He's thirty-three. Seven years older than me—that's crazy."

Tomson said, "You gotta hustle." No one spoke for a while.

There was some time to kill in Bakersfield, and so the band and the film crew drove to Dave's Tacos, a tiny neon-lit stand. Koenig ordered a tongue taco. Everyone else chose beef.

A sheriff got in the taco line. "What's up with the camera?" he asked.

"We're a band," Koenig said.

"What band?" the sheriff said.

"Vampire Weekend."

The sheriff eyed them. "So who's the guitar player here?"

Koenig pointed to Batmanglij and said, "We both play guitar."

"We have an acoustic guitar in the truck," the sheriff said.

"Want to sing a song with us?"

The sheriff thought for a second. "I can't do that," he said. "I'd need to get express permission from Sheriff Donny Youngblood." As the band members were walking away, the sheriff said, "Can I ask you a question? Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?"

They got in the van. Koenig said, "California has a gravity to it."

Back at Chencho's, the audience was gathering. The crowd was made up mostly of teen-agers, but there were also a few dads. They danced to all the new songs; "Horchata" had been released early, and the crowd knew every word. After the show, Koenig was covered in sweat. "I always like when the kids bring their parents," he said. "That's what we're going for—it should be mature and catchy enough so that old people can get down with it. And fresh enough so young kids can get down with it."

When he was back in the van, Koenig noticed some fans standing in the parking lot. "Are those people waiting to get autographs?" he asked. The band members got out and were mobbed by fans in tank tops.

"Oh my God, you're the nicest band ever!"

Koenig was being hugged by girls with braces. "You guys are legit," he said.

They arrived back at the house a little after 2 A.M., and discovered, after the van had driven away, that the door was locked, and they didn't have a key.

"Shit."

Koenig called Cross on his cell phone: "Sorry to wake you up, man."

Cross said he would deal with it, but by then Tomson had climbed into the house through a bathroom window. ♦

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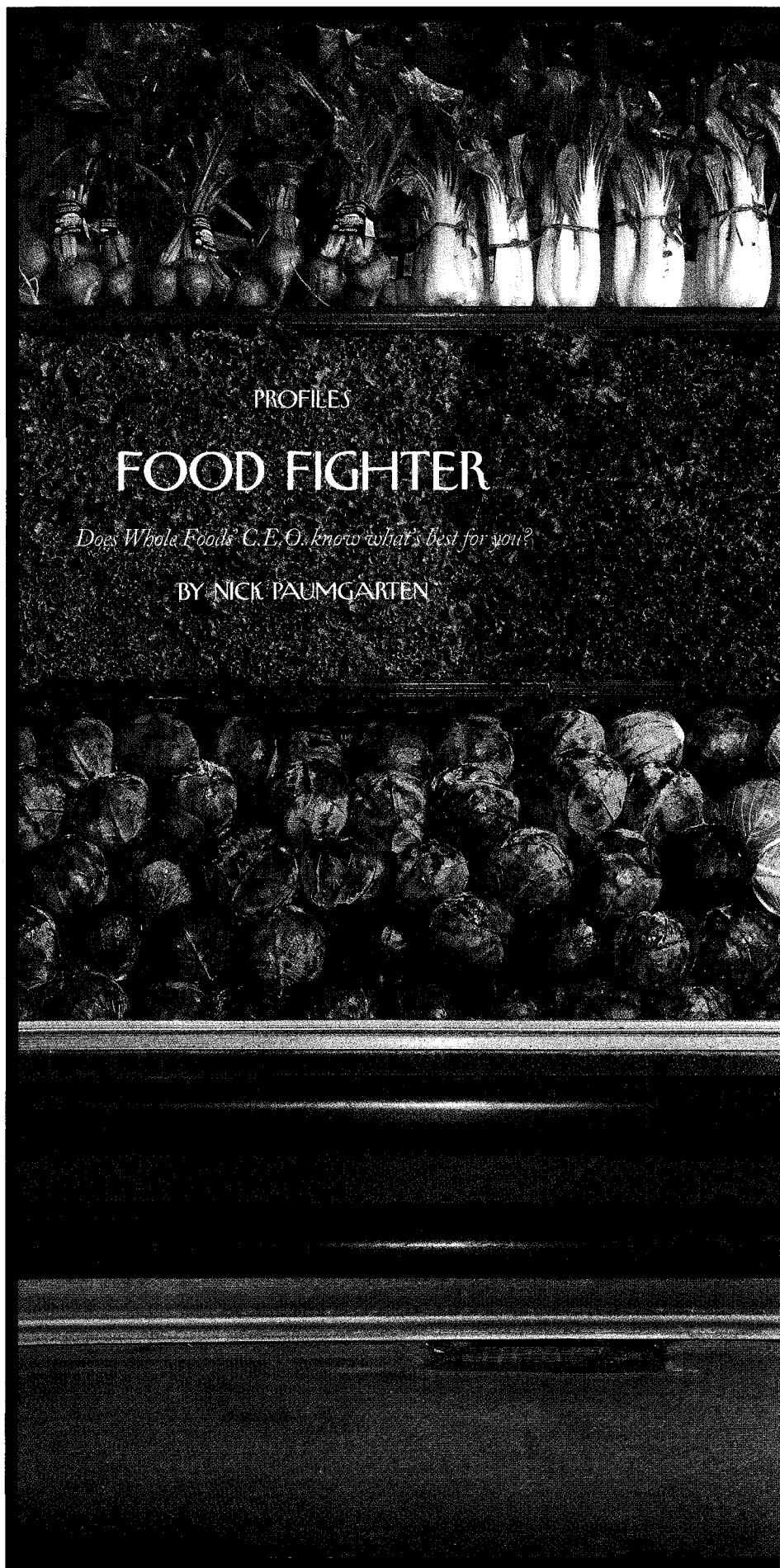
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John Mackey, the co-founder and chief executive of Whole Foods Market, refers to the company as his child—not just his creation but the thing on earth whose difficulties or downfall it pains him most to contemplate. He also sees himself as a “daddy” to his fifty-four thousand employees, who are known as “team members,” but they may occasionally consider him to be more like a crazy uncle. To the extent that a child inherits or adopts a parent’s traits, Whole Foods is an embodiment of many of Mackey’s. A Whole Foods store, in some respects, is like Mackey’s mind turned inside out. Certainly, the evolution of the corporation has often traced his own as a man; it has been an incarnation of his dreams and quirks, his contradictions and trespasses, and whatever he happened to be reading and eating, or not eating.

A year ago, Mackey came across a book called “The Engine 2 Diet,” by an Austin, Texas, firefighter and former professional triathlete named Rip Esselstyn. Basically, you eat plants: you are a rabbit with a skillet. Mackey had been a vegetarian for more than thirty years, and a vegan for five, but the Engine 2 book, among others, helped get him to give up vegetable oils, sugar, and pretty much anything processed. He lost fifteen pounds. This thinking about his body dovetailed with a recession that left many shoppers reluctant or unable to spend much money on the fancy or well-sourced food that had been the stores’ mainstay. Mackey, in a stroke of corporate transubstantiation, declared that Whole Foods would go on a diet, too. It would focus on stripped-down healthy eating. Fewer organic potato chips, more actual potatoes. He told the *Wall Street Journal* in August, “We sell a bunch of junk.”

The repudiation was rash, since Whole Foods would still be selling junk, of a kind. Mackey, an unrepentant foot-in-mouth, as often a fount of exasperation as of inspiration, tried to explain that his comment had been misunderstood. Mackey has been bewildered by the way some things that he has said or done have brought trouble on him and Whole Foods. Public opinion can be capricious and—when you’re a grocer, a retail brand, and a publicly traded company—hard to ignore or override.

Two years ago, Mackey passed through one of the roughest stretches of his life.



PROFILES

FOOD FIGHTER

Does Whole Foods' C.E.O. know what's best for you?

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

John Mackey at a store in Austin, Texas. To “the people that really dislike us,” he says, “Whol



The Bush Administration, in an uncharacteristic spasm of antitrust vigilance, was fighting Whole Foods' purchase of a competitor, Wild Oats, contending that the merged company would unfairly corner what the Federal Trade Commission called the "premium natural and organic supermarket" sector. Meanwhile, the Securities and Exchange Commission was investigating Mackey: for nearly eight years, he had been secretly logging onto an Internet message board devoted to Whole Foods stock under the sock puppet, or pseudonym, "rahodeb" (an anagram of Deborah, his wife's name), praising his own company, disparaging Wild Oats, and throwing in a flattering remark about his hair ("I think he looks cute!"). Mackey, for years a media and stock-market sweetheart, was suddenly recast as a monopolist, a fruitcake, and a sneak. The share price fell, and, even though the government eventually let the deal stand (with a few concessions from Whole Foods) and gave the sock puppetry a pass, many wondered how Mackey managed to hold on to his job.

During this period, Mackey sought succor in spiritual practice. He engaged a friend, a follower of the Czech transpersonal psychologist Stanislav Grof, to guide him through a therapeutic session of holotropic breathing. "I had this very powerful session, very powerful. It lasted about two hours," Mackey said in an inspirational CD set he released last year called "Passion and Purpose: The Power of Conscious Capitalism." "I was having a dialogue with what I would define as my deeper self, or my higher self." He had a pair of epiphanies, one having to do with severed relationships that needed healing. The other was that "if I wanted to continue to do Whole Foods, there couldn't be any part of my life that was secretive or hidden or that I'd be embarrassed [about] if people found out about it. I had to let go of all of that," he said. "I'm this public figure now."

He couldn't "embarrass the company," he told me. "I have to grow up"—he is fifty-six. "I can't have affairs with women. One of the things that happened was you have more money and you have more opportunities for such things. And those are sort of off-limits. You can't do that. Think of Mark Sanford, in South Carolina."

His vows of discretion apparently allow for a great deal of latitude. He talks openly

about his fixations and eccentricities—most of them, anyway. ("I am not going to talk about my sex life," he told me, without my having asked him to.) His blend of guile and guilelessness is peculiar. "I no longer drink alcohol around journalists," he said. He worries that he reveals too much. He can't help but speak his mind, out of which spring confounding ideas and conventionally irreconcilable contradictions. The man who has perhaps done as much as anyone to bring the natural-foods movement from the crunchy fringe into the mainstream is also a vocal libertarian, an orthodox free-marketer, an admirer of Milton Friedman, Ronald Reagan, and Ayn Rand. In the 2008 Presidential election, he voted for Bob Barr—Ron Paul wasn't on the ballot.

The right-wing hippie is a rare bird, and it's fair to say that most of Whole Foods' shoppers have trouble conceiving of it. They tend to be of a different stripe, politically and philosophically, and they were either oblivious or dimly aware of Mackey's views, until the moment, this summer, when Mackey published an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* asserting that the government should not be in the business of providing health care. This was hardly a radical view, and yet in the gathering heat of the health-care debate the op-ed, virally distributed via the left-leaning blogs, raised a fury. In no time, liberals were organizing boycotts of Whole Foods. (Right-wingers staged retaliatory "buy-cotts.") Mackey had thrown tinder on the long-smoldering suspicion, in some quarters, that he was a profiteer in do-gooder disguise, and that he, and therefore Whole Foods, was in some way insincere or even counterfeit. No one can say that he hasn't brought it on himself.

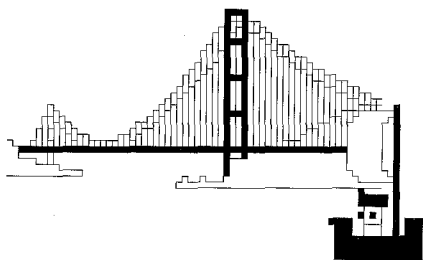
"I have my own views, and they're not necessarily the same as Whole Foods'," Mackey told me. "People want me to suppress who I am. I guess that's why so many politicians and C.E.O.s get to be sort of boring, because they end up suppressing any individuality to conform to

some phony, inauthentic way of being. I'd rather be myself."

"He's a ready-aim-fire guy, and he's not real disciplined in how he speaks his mind," Gary Hirshberg, the C.E.O. of Stonyfield, the organic milk and yogurt producer, told me. "He has a really hard time reconciling his public and private selves." Mackey's resilience has surprised even those who, like Hirshberg, hold him in high esteem. "John has that Clintonesque ability to hang in there," Hirshberg said. "He is Whole Foods management's greatest asset but also, at times, its greatest challenge."

Depending on where you are on the spectrum of epicurean cultural politics, you may consider Whole Foods to be a righteous grocer or a cynical con, a prod to self-improvement or a gateway to decadence, a neighborhood boon or a blight, a force for social good or a place to pick up chicks. To the likes of Wal-Mart and Costco, it has been an impetus to carry healthier, more judiciously sourced food. To small neighborhood natural- or gourmet-food shops, it has sometimes been an impetus to go out of business. It has enabled organic and artisanal producers to scale up, and put pressure on the giants to at least pretend that they are scaling down. It has less than a one-percent share of the American grocery market, yet it has unquestionably transformed the way Americans produce, buy, and eat food. Its name, justifiably or not, is shorthand for a food revolution.

To some, Whole Foods is Whole Paycheck, an overpriced luxury for yuppie gastronomes and fussy label-readers. Or it is Holy Foods, the commercial embodiment of environmental and nutritional pieties. To hard-core proponents of natural and organic food, and of food production that's local, polycultural, and carbon-stingy, Whole Foods is a disappointment—a bundle of big-business compromises and half-steps, an example of something merely good that the perfect can reasonably be declared an enemy of. It's a welter of paradoxes: a staunchly anti-union enterprise that embraces some progressive labor practices; a self-styled world-improver that must also deliver quarterly results to Wall Street; a big-box chain putting on small-town airs; an evangelist for healthy eating that sells sausages, ice cream, and beer.

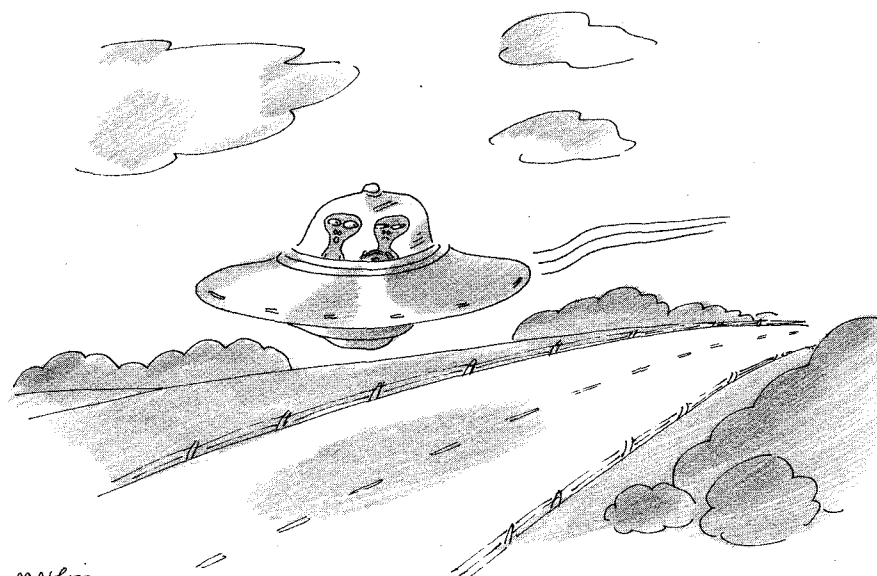


The most perplexing paradox of them all, and in many respects their root source, is Mackey himself. I met him in a conference room at the company headquarters, in Austin. He slipped in through a door in the conference room and made a comment to a colleague about a book of Wendell Berry poems. We talked briefly about Frisbee golf, his game of choice. He was dressed in khakis, a pleather belt, trail shoes, and a green polo shirt with a Whole Foods logo. He is not a guy who cares a lot about how he looks, unless he cares a lot about appearing not to care. He has angular eyebrows and tousled hair. His disposition was serene, but you could sense a prickly, Jesuitical undercurrent coursing beneath it. He speaks softly, with a gentle Texas twang.

The health-care op-ed's headline, "THE WHOLE FOODS ALTERNATIVE TO OBAMACARE," was the *Journal's*, Mackey says, but the sentiments were his. Mackey's prescriptions ranged from the obvious (people need to eat better) to the market-minded (promote interstate competition among insurers) to the dreamy (the corporations will take care of us). The gist was that, together, they'd obviate the need for a federal plan, and that the course being pursued by the White House and the Democrats would have disastrous consequences. He led with an epigram attributed to Margaret Thatcher: "The problem with socialism is that eventually you run out of other people's money."

Before submitting the op-ed, he showed it to Lanny Davis, the former Clinton White House special counsel, who represented Whole Foods in its antitrust battle. Davis told me that he "prodded John a little to think like a liberal," and he reckons that the Thatcher quote was ill-advised. Still, he blames "left-wing McCarthyism" for the outrage that greeted the piece.

"I was so viciously attacked for two reasons," Mackey told me. "One is that people had an idea in their minds about the way Whole Foods was. So when I articulated a capitalistic interpretation of what needed to be done in health care, that was disappointing to some people." He begrudges the extent to which people have projected onto Whole Foods an unrealistic and idealistic vision of the company. "The C.E.O. of Safeway, Steven Burd, wrote an op-ed piece in June advo-



"I think we just bit a flying squirrel."

cating, basically, market solutions to the health-care problem, and nobody gave a shit," he said.

Of course, Whole Foods has always held itself up as a paragon of virtue. It is an article of faith that it is, as Mackey often says, a mission-based business. It has seven "core values," which are, broadly speaking, commitments to the fulfillment and equitable treatment of all "stakeholders"—customers, employees, investors, and suppliers—as well as to the health of the populace, of the food system, and of the earth. Whole Foods' claim to righteousness is, in many respects, its unique selling point. If the mission is sincere, so is the commitment to making money. Mackey is adamant, and not merely unapologetic, that his company—any company—can and should pursue profits and a higher purpose simultaneously, and that in fact the pursuit of both enhances the pursuit of each. "Whole Foods itself is a market-based solution," he said. "We're a corporation. We are in capitalism. We have to compete with Safeway and Wal-Mart and Kroger and Wegmans and Trader Joe's. What's odd about it is that that's what we've always been. We're not a co-op." To "the people that really dislike us," he said, "Whole Foods is a big corporation, so they think that we've crossed over to the dark side. Kind of the Darth Vader myth, that somehow or another we've become bad because we've become large."

The second reason people got so angry about his *Journal* column, Mackey says, is that he exposed what he calls the issue's "shadow side." "The shadow side is when you bring up arguments, or a position, that people have never reflected upon and never really thought through, and it's threatening to them," he said. "It's a shadow. It's underneath. And, rather than deal with it, they lash out in anger and fear and hatred. In that op-ed piece, I was trying to make the argument that health care is really not different from anything else we provide for ourselves"—he had mentioned food and shelter—"and that capitalism is better than socialism at providing those things." He added, "You certainly can articulate that I would rather live in a society where there's universal health care. I think that's my personal preference, but all I can do is articulate that it's not intrinsic in the nature of human beings to have a right to health care. And, so, kill the messenger."

Mackey was brought up in a conventional middle-class home in a suburb of Houston. His father, Bill Mackey, was a professor of accounting at Rice University, and his mother gave up school teaching to raise John and his two siblings. When John was sixteen, in 1969, Bill Mackey became the C.E.O. of a health-care company, which was sold, fifteen years later, for nearly a billion dollars. Bill could be a domineering dinner-

table debater and an occasionally wounding plain-speaker; he was the best man at John's wedding, the first investor in Whole Foods, and, until John was in his late thirties, the presiding object of his efforts to succeed and please. People who saw them interact, during the years when Bill Mackey served on the Whole Foods board of directors, observed a conspicuous inheritance of certain traits, and an equally conspicuous struggle to lay sole claim to them. Bill Mackey died in 2004, after suffering from Alzheimer's.

Mackey says that he was not as close to his mother, who died in 1987. "The last thing she asked me, she said, 'John, promise me you'll go back to school and get a college degree.' I said, 'Mom, I'm not going back to school. I'm doing Whole Foods.' She said, 'I wish you'd just give up that stupid health-food store. Your father and I gave you a fine mind, and you're wasting it being a grocer.'" That was their final conversation. "I was so proud of my own honesty and my own candor and my own integrity. But she died thinking that I was a failure and that I didn't love her, and, I mean, why put your mother through that on her death-bed? I wish I could take that back."

In high school, Mackey was an indifferent student, a late bloomer, puberty-wise, and a fanatic about basketball, science fiction, and girls. Before his senior year, he was cut from the varsity basketball team, and he persuaded his

parents to move so that he could switch schools and play. "That changed my life, because for the first time I realized that if you didn't like the hand you were dealt you didn't just have to feel sorry for yourself. You could do something about it."

He went on to Trinity University, a small school in San Antonio, and the world flowered before him, as it did for so many in those days. "I was reading a lot of philosophy and religion," he said. "And I did a lot of those experiments that young people do when they're in college. I'll not name those. We can't be candid about everything in our society. You can't kick the door down. What people were doing in the early seventies, I was doing it, too." He quit playing basketball and, for the next several years, went back and forth between Trinity and the University of Texas, in Austin, taking only courses that interested him, and therefore hardly advancing toward a degree. He settled in Austin, in a house of ten or so men. He worked part-time as a dishwasher and spent his nights reading in the library. He had a beard and long bushy hair. Eventually, he moved into a co-ed vegetarian collective.

"I had no interest in a vegetarian life style," he said. "But what I was interested in was alternative life styles. And I thought, honestly, that I'd meet a lot of interesting women. And I did."

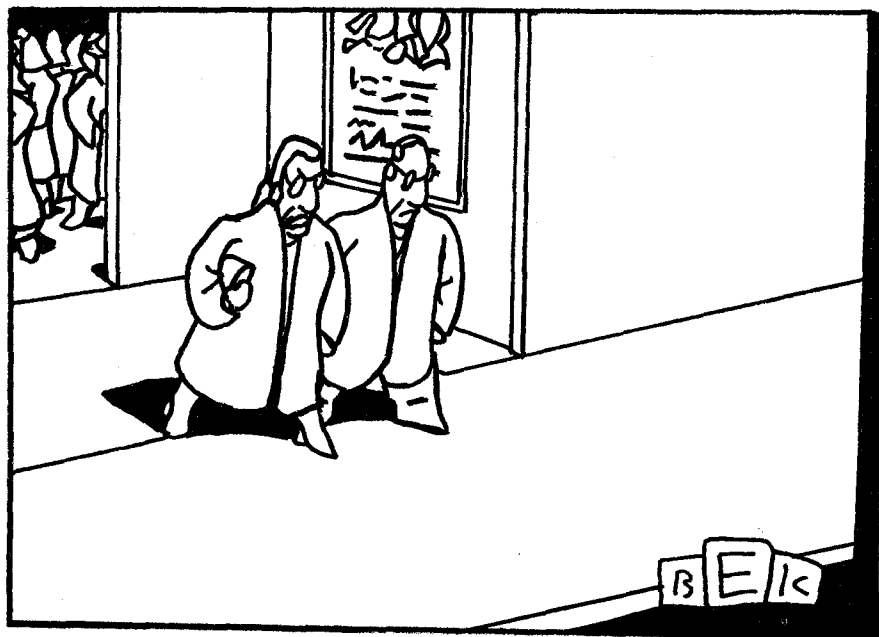
He began to care about food. His mother had been of the generation of women emancipated by frozen and pro-

cessed foods, and he hadn't really ever paid particular attention to what he had been given to eat. Now he started cooking for the collective and working part time at a natural-foods store called Good Foods. "I loved it," he said. "I loved retail. I loved being around food. I loved natural foods. I loved organic foods. I loved the whole idea of it. And a thought entered into my mind that maybe this is what I could do."

The Whole Foods shopper at some point experiences a pang of surprise upon discovering that the chain started in Texas, rather than in, say, Berkeley or Boston. But Austin isn't really Texas. It is the People's Republic of Austin. In the seventies, it was a cheap and groovy little town, much smaller and less commercial than it is now. There was no Dell or Intel or AMD. Its particular countercultural contribution was the cosmic cowboy, the dope-smoking redneck, so perhaps it was fitting that, amid a burgeoning natural-foods scene (there were a dozen or so spots: the Hobbit Hole, the Juice Factory, Wheatsville, etc.), a kind of complement took root: the brown-rice capitalist.

In 1978, with forty-five thousand dollars from friends and family, he and his girlfriend at the time, Renee Lawson, decided to start a store of their own, which they called SaferWay—a takeoff on Safeway. The store was on the ground floor of a Victorian house; they lived on the third floor and ran a small restaurant on the second—a rustic prototype for today's prepared-food extravaganzas. The house didn't have a shower, so they bathed in the store using the hose from a dishwasher, a creation legend that the company holds dear.

He soon noticed that a number of much bigger natural-foods stores had sprouted up around the country, such as Mrs. Gooch's and Frazier Farms, in California. He persuaded Craig Weller and Mark Skiles, the owners of a store called Clarksville Natural Grocery, to merge with him and Lawson (in part, by implying that he might put them out of business), and, in 1980, the four of them opened the first Whole Foods, in a former night club. It was ten thousand square feet. They stocked not just lentils and granola but, in contravention of the co-op ethos, indulgences like meat, beer, and wine; there were aisles full of five-gallon bottles of distilled water, to avoid the embarrassment of empty shelf space. The



"I prefer Meryl Streep not having fun."

idea was to go beyond the movement's old tofu severity, the air of judgment and self-abnegation. Their version of decadence seems Spartan now, but at the time it represented a cultural shift.

Skiles, who left the company in the mid-eighties, after some friction with Mackey ("It became clear I was less my own boss than I'd expected to be," he said), and who now has a pizza shop in Austin called Pizza Nizza, told me, "We realized that if we have guys who come in to buy a bag of sprouts and then sit around all day reading we'll go out of business quick. You need people to shop, to have the inclination to push a cart around and fill it up."

The first Whole Foods thrived, with a setback or two. (Another cherished legend: in 1981, a flood inundated the store with eight feet of water, and a battalion of customers helped the founders clean, repair, restock, and reopen it.) It became something of a local hot spot. "I did all the hiring the first five years," Skiles said. "I had a field day, man. Everyone wanted to work there. It was like hiring bartenders at Studio 54. I became famous for hiring gorgeous women as cashiers. Hey, that's what we were selling: vitality and sensuality." ("That's not my recollection," Mackey said.)

They built two more stores in Austin and expanded to Houston and Dallas. Then they bought a store in New Orleans called, of all things, Whole Food Company, settling on a strategy of buying existing stores in pursuit of a kind of nationwide Pax Austinia. The owner of the New Orleans store, Peter Roy, eventually became the company's first president. (Lawson left the company in 1981, to move to Belize.)

Next came Palo Alto, which happened to be next door to a good deal of venture capital, and Mackey and his partners spent months plying Sand Hill Road. Of the twelve V.C.s they went to see, all but three turned them down. As Mackey recalls in "Passion and Purpose," "One of them said one day: 'You know, I really think you're just selling hippie food to hippies. I gotta tell ya that I don't think it's gonna work. But if it does work, Safeway's gonna just steal it from you and you're not going to be able to exist anyway.'" Mackey, for one, always feared that Safeway, or some other big chain, would do just that, but for a long time it did not.

A key contributor to Whole Foods' success, and to its reputation and self-image as a progressive business, was the company's structure. Whole Foods is divided into a dozen regions, which in some ways operate almost as separate businesses, to encourage creativity and a sense of ownership. (This arrangement can make life complicated for suppliers.) The stores, too, have a high degree of autonomy. There are regional oddities: Venice, California, has a kombucha bar; Portland, Maine, is the only store that carries live lobster; in Dallas, you can hit "The Spa by Whole Foods Market" while a team member shops for you. The team is the fundamental Whole Foods work unit. Teams participate in selecting their bosses and their products, and are accountable for their performance.

"We've been making it up as we've gone along," Mackey said. "I never took any business classes or worked for other companies. I don't like authoritarian managers."

After the successful opening of a Chicago store, in 1991, the company went public, and embarked on a shopping spree. The new vassals enriched what had been a fairly clumsy enterprise with their particular wisdoms; for all his curiosity and drive, Mackey was not an expert grocer. In 1991, Whole Foods bought Wellspring Grocery, in North Carolina, and kept its co-owner Lex Alexander to run its private-label business. In 1992, it bought Bread & Circus, in Boston, whose owner, Tony Harnett, was known for his procurement of seafood. Next came Mrs. Gooch's, and with it Sandy Gooch and his head for diet supplements and the merchandising of meat. And so on, until Whole Foods grew to be the cornucopian gourmet grocer that we now either want or find wanting. It has two hundred and eighty-seven stores. (Mackey recently told the magazine *Reason* that the key variable in deciding where to put the new stores is the number of college graduates within a sixteen-minute drive.) The company has sales of about eight billion dollars a year, enabling it to affect the food-supply chain, for good and ill.

"When you look at the power to move billions of dollars through the agricultural economy to address some deep and unconscionable problems, you have to credit Whole Foods for being one of the pivot

points," Hirshberg, of Stonyfield, said. "It deserves a lot of the credit for breaking us out of a cul-de-sac in terms of food and health, and the health of the planet."

Mackey is an example of what you might call the auteur C.E.O. Like Steve Jobs's, his personality is entwined in his company's. He doesn't bother with day-to-day operations; he's not a technician or a face man. When he's asked what it is he does, exactly, he describes a kind of philosopher-king, who brings big ideas to bear. Mackey, an outspoken critic of executive overcompensation, pays himself a dollar a year. No one at the company can have a salary more than nineteen times what the average team member makes. (On average, an S. & P. 500 C.E.O. makes three hundred and nineteen times what a production worker does.) Last year, the highest salary went to Walter Robb, the co-president and chief operating officer, who made just over four hundred thousand dollars (supplemented by a bonus and stock options). The average hourly wage was sixteen dollars and fifty cents.

Whole Foods has made Mackey a wealthy man. He owns roughly thirty million dollars in stock—less than one per cent of the company—and has sold millions more over the years. Still, he flies commercial and drives a Honda Civic hybrid. He has houses in Boulder and Austin, and a seven-hundred-and-twenty-acre non-working ranch an hour outside of town, where he and Deborah spend many weekends. They married eighteen years ago. She's an adherent of Sufism. This fall, for a Halloween party, she dressed Mackey up as a Qigong master, and herself as a Chinese opera singer; in the costume competition, they came in fifth. They believe in having—and, being childless, have the luxury of having—separate lives, in addition to a life together. In "Passion and Purpose," he talks about a conversation they had at a spiritual seminar: "She told me how she only wanted to be with me in this love connection, this heart connection. She wanted to be there for all eternity. I started to get nervous, I started to get freaked out.... She said, 'What are you afraid of?' ... 'I like love, I like being with love, but I don't want to be trapped in the love space.' ... That's a joke now between us all the time, whenever I start to with-

draw. . . 'Are you afraid of the *love space*?'"

The non-love space in his house is his study, which she avoids. Sometimes he watches sports there—he roots for the Rockets—but most of the time he reads. He sits in a recliner, surrounded by stacks of books. He gives them a good working over, marking them with underlinings, highlighter, and Post-its. He is, as he says, an intuitive-thinking type, on the Myers-Briggs scale. When I asked him recently what he was reading, he named half a dozen books and then a few days later had a press person send me a list of thirteen. Among them were a critique of Keynes ("It's been proven it doesn't work, but Keynes was such a brilliant and fascinating guy that he hypnotized this whole generation of economists"); biographies of Booker T. Washington, Peter Drucker, and Ayn Rand ("She wasn't a business person. And I am. And I know something about the market. And, by telling people that it's all about selfishness, you're alienating a huge potential part of the market unnecessarily. She really meant self-interest. Enlightened self-interest. So why use 'selfishness'? It's a bad brand"); books about "bourgeois virtues," "integral consciousness," health-care reform, fasting, and basketball; and "Pride and Prejudice." ("I've gotten old enough so that my masculinity is not in question.")

One of the books on the list was "Heaven and Earth: Global Warming—the Missing Science," a skeptical take on climate change. Mackey told me that he agrees with the book's assertion that, as he put it, "no scientific consensus exists" regarding the causes of climate change; he added, with a candor you could call bold or reckless, that it would be a pity to allow "hysteria about global warming" to cause us "to raise taxes and increase regulation, and in turn lower our standard of living and lead to an increase in poverty." One would imagine that, on this score, many of his customers, to say nothing of most climate scientists, might disagree. He also said, "Historically, prosperity tends to correlate to warmer temperatures."

Mackey likes to say that he does things primarily for fun, including Whole Foods. His definition of fun blends self-denial and self-indulgence, and a will to perfection. In 2001, he came across a book called "Beyond Backpacking," by Ray Jardine, the father of what's called "ultralight" hiking—the discipline of selecting

gear and material of nearly unimaginable low weight. He got his pack down to around twelve pounds, excluding food and water. He talked the board of directors into granting him a five-month sabbatical to hike the Appalachian Trail, and recruited a few friends; the following spring and summer, they walked from Georgia to Maine. His trail name is Strider. Since then, he's gone backpacking every summer—he was on the Appalachian Trail in August, when controversy over his health-care column broke—and has bought a controlling interest in a company called Gossamer Gear. His pack weight is now less than seven pounds. Ultralight hiking is, in some respects, like the grocery business: each requires strict attention to inventory and a fondness for a slog. The problem is that the grocery business involves other people.

"Well, it's less fun when people are calling you an asshole and writing you hate mail, but generally I'm still having fun," Mackey told me. "Yeah, I am self-actualizing myself. You want to use Maslow's hierarchy of needs? I am fulfilling my inner desires, in terms of reaching my fullest potential as a human being. I became a grocer."

In 1994, H-E-B, a Texas supermarket chain controlled by the San Antonio billionaire Charles Butt, opened Central Market, a huge gourmet grocery store, in Austin, in a shopping center north of the university. It siphoned off some Whole Foods shoppers. I heard it said in Austin that "Central Market is of the people and Whole Foods is of the Man." Mackey may not be Che Guevara, but, in fairness, neither is Butt. Central Market's incursion spurred Whole Foods to open, in 2005, a store beneath its new headquarters, at the edge of downtown. The store is eighty thousand square feet.

At lunchtime and in the early evening, the store teems. The layout is diffuse, with a series of food stations—pizza, seafood, Indian—occupying the slack space between the packaged goods and the meat, cheese, and fish. (One Austin resident and Central Market partisan told me, "The store is a reflection of Mackey's personality. It has a fuck-you layout.") You can buy a bottle of wine, and drink it there. My first day at the store, lured by the smell of mesquite, I found myself in line at the barbecue station. The counterman pulled out

a brisket that had been in the smoker for fifteen hours and distributed samples. Engine 2 this was not. A very large man was eating a taco—brisket rolled up in a flour tortilla with jalapeños, onions, pickles, and sauce. He said, "If you get one, you'll want another. If you get two, you'll know you had brisket." I ordered two, and it was so: I possessed the knowledge of having had brisket. The next day, I dined at the vegan counter. I decided on a "gyro"—seitan, cucumbers, tzatziki, seaweed. Afterward, I wanted another.

Earlier, I had got a cheese primer from the head buyer, Cathy Strange (her desert-island cheese is Mt. Tam, a stroke-hastener from Cowgirl Creamery, in Marin County, which sells for about thirty dollars a pound) and before that a tour of the store from Walter Robb, who had overseen its design and construction. Robb had found inspiration in the KaDeWe department store, in Berlin, which, when the city was divided, served as an advertisement for capitalistic abundance.

This store, like most, led with produce. "Nothing more whole foods than produce," Robb said. "Look at all the colors." There were thirty varieties of apples. "Most markets say, Let's throw the food out there and stick it in your bodies. No, it's a beautiful, stimulating experience. It's a visual experience." Sometimes the store deploys "dummies," wooden or cardboard devices hidden under mounds of produce, to create an illusion of greater supply—supermarket Wonderbras. At the meat counter, he described the differences in sheen and texture of grass-fed and grain-fed beef.

Robb is a tall and fit Bostonian who went West to attend college at Stanford in the early seventies. His then-girlfriend had back-to-the-land parents up in Trinity County, and while reading Wendell Berry and helping them crack their own wheat he decided to start a natural-foods store there. He eventually opened one in Mill Valley, which Whole Foods bought in 1991. (It was store No. 11.)

We passed the candy counter, with its "chocolate-enrobing" fountain—you can have anything dipped in chocolate, even salmon. "We got caught up a little in the foodie stuff of the nineties," Robb said. "We have in some ways, as we've been making our way along here, contributed to the feeling that this"—he gestured to

SKETCHBOOK BY STEVE BRODNER



the store—"is not something that people can afford, or it's not accessible to them, or it's over-the-top. We have our share of responsibility in that. We're not here to sell cheap food, but we've been working hard on our value flank."

When I asked Robb about Mackey, a look of something like temperance—a flash of mirth—crossed his face. "I would write about him being the guy who, at these sort of inflection points that every business faces, seems to show up with ideas that are original and thoughtful and attuned to the moment." He divided those into "true-ups, let-gos, and big steps."

The healthy-eating initiative is a bit of all three. Copies of "The Engine 2 Diet" were stacked by the entrance, next to a booth occupied by a newly deployed nutritional counsellor, a "source-a-tarian," who can advise shoppers on conveyances for leafy greens. Around the Whole Foods headquarters, employees obsess over kale (which, according to the nutrition scoring system that the company has adopted, has more nutrients per calorie than any other food) the way bond traders do over swaps or Tiger Woods. Employees can compete in a three-month nationwide derby, a health nuts' Hogwarts House Cup, in which teams get points for exercising and for using mass transit. Beginning in 2010, they will be able to earn better employee discounts by lowering their cholesterol and losing weight. This doesn't mean that Whole Foods is scrapping its cheese counter or its beer alley or its chocolate-enrobing apparatus. At Whole Foods, the customer is still always mostly right.

With Mackey, it's natural to wonder: is he at heart an entrepreneur, who discovered, in natural foods, a worthy vehicle for self-actualization and self-enrichment, or a missionary, who discovered in the grocery business a worldly vehicle for change?

"So that's a very interesting question," he said, leaning forward. "How are they opposed to one another? People think that they are, but why do you think they're opposed?"

I said that I didn't think they had to be.

"I don't, either. In fact, I think they're very connected together. This is a paradigm that has polarized our country and led to bad thinking. It's holding the na-

ONLY SO MUCH

I bend to the open notebook; distracted, turn my head.
Tiny brown ants are climbing up a stalk of goldenrod.

It isn't clear what goal they hope to reach.
I pick up a sharpened pencil, start to sketch.

A passing cloud; the sky goes dull. I shut
the notebook and open it from the back, to write.

There is only so much we can notice all at once.
Now this morning's dream makes an appearance:

packed lecture hall where students overflow
to aisles and floor. What do they want to know?

I have the sense they're gathered here to learn
some kind of surgery. The brain donation

card, wallet-size, arrived in this morning's mail.
I close the notebook. The patient ants still crawl.

A sudden breeze: the grasses toss their tops.
Wild strawberry runners are clambering over this rock,

tion's progress back. It's as if there were a wall. And on one side of the wall is this belief that not-for-profits and government exist for public service, and that they're fundamentally altruistic, that they have a deeper purpose, and they're doing good in the world, and they have pure motives. On the other side of the wall are corporations. And they're just selfish and greedy. They have no purpose other than to make money. They're a bunch of psychopaths. And I'd like to tear that wall down. Human beings are obviously self-interested. We do look after ourselves, but we're capable of love, empathy, and compassion, and I don't see that business is any different."

He went on, "We're trying to do good. And we're trying to make money. The more money we make, the more good we can do." By this, he had in mind not the traditional philanthropic argument that more money earned equals more to give away but, rather, that a good company—that is, his company—which sells good things and treats its employees, shareholders, customers, and suppliers well, can spread goodness simply by thriving.

This was a variation on what he calls "conscious capitalism," which some peo-

ple, smelling an oxymoron, or worse, snicker at. His idea is that business should have a higher purpose—that, just as doctors heal and teachers educate, business-people should be after something besides money. It may be an easier argument for a grocer to make; he feeds people, and if he feeds them properly he heals and educates them, too. But it borders on humbug when you apply it to, say, Wall Street. Consciousness, as it relates to capitalism, is in the eyes not so much of the beholder as of the capitalist.

Whole Foods routinely ranks high on those lists of companies that are the best to work for. The health and retirement benefits are relatively generous. Mackey regards his blend of paternalism and sovereignty as a recipe for proper governance, an expression of both compassion and creativity. This view is not shared by unions, which have complained that Mackey prevents unionization among his employees, notably at a store in Madison, Wisconsin, where team members had voted to unionize. Unions have picketed store openings and, as activist investors in Whole Foods stock, have called for Mackey's firing.

In the early eighties, Mackey told a

where, if I sat here long enough, eventually
the tough, lithe tendrils would also crisscross me.

I could climb down from my temporary tower,
go to the house and fill a glass with water,

get out my watercolors, dip my brush,
memorialize this moment with a wash

of color; sketch the runners, trace a border,
as if imitation equalled order.

Or I could take a walk down to the brook
or stretch out in the hammock with a book

or let my thoughts' red runners trace a line
to the null magnet of my husband's brain,

the hospital where he's "undergoing observation,"
the arid wide plateau of the condition—

a battleground to which I will return.
But there is room for only so much attention.

—Rachel Hadas

reporter, "The union is like having herpes. It doesn't kill you, but it's unpleasant and inconvenient, and it stops a lot of people from becoming your lover." (That quote, to Mackey's dismay, won't go away, either.) His disdain for contemporary unionism is ideological, as well as self-serving. Like many who have come before, he says that it was only when he started a business—when he had to meet payroll and deal with government red tape—that his political and economic views, fed on readings of Friedman, Rand, and the Austrians, veered to the right. But there is also a psychological dimension. It derives in large part from a tendency, common among smart people, to presume that everyone in the world either does or should think as he does—to take for granted that people can (or want to) strike his patented balance of enlightenment and self-interest. It sometimes sounds as if he believed that, if every company had him at the helm, there would be no need for unions or health-care reform, and that therefore every company should have someone like him, and that therefore there should be no unions or health-care reform. In other words, because he runs a business a cer-

tain way, others will, can, and should, and so the safeguards that have evolved over the generations to protect against human venality—against, say, greedy, bullying bosses—are no longer necessary. The logic is as sound as the presumption is preposterous.

His belief in the power of the individual is such that blame falls on individuals, too. In his view, it tends to be the fault of the unhealthy or fat person that he or she is unhealthy or fat. People just need to eat better. He told me, "If I could, I would wave a magic wand so that Americans ate better, because the diseases that are killing us—heart disease, cancer, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, Alzheimer's—these diseases have a high correlation with diet. And that is something that most people do not understand."

It matters less to him that our food system, for a dozen reasons, as Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser, and many others have chronicled, has been rigged to deliver unhealthy food at artificially low cost to a misguided public. People have the power and the means to choose rice and beans over Big Macs, and when they fail to do so they bring ruin on themselves, and on everyone else. In his *Wall*

Street Journal column, Mackey wrote of "the realization that every American adult is responsible for his or her own health. Unfortunately, many of our health-care problems are self-inflicted: two-thirds of Americans are now overweight, and one-third are obese." Inarguable as this assertion may be, it struck a discordant note. People who may look to Whole Foods to agitate for changes in the food system, or who have been bankrupted by medical costs despite eating right, might wonder if it was quite the moment to be preaching personal responsibility. "That was a disappointing statement: 'What's wrong with you? Just stop eating,'" Theresa Marquez, the chief marketing executive of Organic Valley, the giant farming coöperative, told me. "It's not just an individual thing. It's a societal and systemic thing. I said to Walter Robb, 'Walter, why are you letting him do this?'"

A grocer, typically, wants to hide what goes on in back. A grocery store is a theatrical production, designed to dazzle the customer, and to disguise the artifice and hard work behind the scenes. Over the years, grocers have helped keep their customers happily ignorant of the food's origins—of the horrors of the slaughterhouse, the miseries of the onion fields, and the absurdities contained in a can of soda or a bag of chips. Our interface with the food chain ended with the stock boy and his sticker gun in Aisle 6.

Whole Foods sought to change that. It began to sell information and narrative, along with the food. It told stories about where the food came from, putting up displays by the seafood counter with photographs and descriptions of the real fishermen who had caught it all—a genre that Michael Pollan, in "The Omnivore's Dilemma," called "supermarket pastoral."

The profusion of provender—the array of colors and shapes, the gleaming fruits, fishes, and meats, the grains and cakes and ranges of artisanal cheeses and beers—is as much an apotheosis of America's abundance and reach as it is any kind of refutation of it. Whole Foods may aim to be a rebuke to the excess that comes of petrochemical might, unconscious gluttony, and corn-bloated immoderation. But it is also an imperial presentation of progress's spoils, like a king's Christmas feasts. The business depends on it, even if the brand

image does not. The layout encourages impulse purchases. This is how a weekend grocery bill there can easily run to four hundred bucks. It may be that the prices of items that you'd buy elsewhere are the same at Whole Foods, but you come across stuff at a Whole Foods that you would not at a Stop & Shop, or at some dusty Yorkville Gristedes. The stingy shopper—a slayer of leftovers—may wonder whether there is some Potemkin in the profusion; it is hard to imagine people buying, much less eating, all that before it goes bad. But the stores can't afford to waste vast quantities of food merely to send subliminal signals. Those prepared-food teams are adept at converting forlorn vegetables into casserole.

But might there be some Potemkin in the entire enterprise? Pollan argued that the impression left by the store's displays was misleading; "organic" often meant that the food came from gigantic monocultural operations owned by the big food conglomerates, which abided by the letter but not the spirit of the term, rather than from, say, the Edenic chemical-free family farm that you pictured when you paid a dollar more for the organic soy chips. Pollan's specimen was asparagus, flown, in January, from Argentina. It was

organic, by U.S.D.A. standards (which a Whole Foods executive had helped to devise), but it had travelled six thousand miles, and it tasted like cardboard. The irony, then, was that Whole Foods, in lifting one veil from the food industry, was complicit in replacing it with another. Whole Foods was, in Pollan's account, kind of a phony.

In 2006, when "The Omnivore's Dilemma" came out, Pollan went to Austin to do a reading in a bookstore, which, it turned out, Mackey partly owned. Mackey requested a meeting. They talked for a few hours. Mackey was angry about how Whole Foods was depicted and handed Pollan a five-page single-spaced letter, which he then posted on his Web site. Pollan wrote a lengthy response, and for months they carried on an exchange of polemics that culminated in an onstage debate in Berkeley. The upshot was that Mackey acknowledged certain shortcomings and vowed to make changes, among them greater commitments to local farming and grass-fed beef.

Still, he chafes at Pollan's exaltation of the little. "America has kind of a love affair with small business," Mackey said. "A local farmer is a businessman. He's selling stuff. But he has apparently not

been corrupted. He's still small, he's still pure. But at some point, if he was to grow, he would cross over. People used to think Whole Foods was cute and cuddly, and now we're this industrial, pastoral, organic monster that cares only about money and is selfish and horrible."

Mackey has on several occasions acted on criticisms. At a shareholder meeting in 2003, animal-rights activists staged a protest over duck, which led him to examine the meat business more closely. This inspired his vegan conversion, and persuaded him to overhaul the meat-procurement process. Some criticize Whole Foods for selling meat at all. A few years ago, Mackey told *Grist*, a Seattle environmental magazine, "Sure, I wish Whole Foods didn't sell animal products, but the fact of the matter is that the population of vegetarians in America is like 5 percent, and vegans are like 25 or 30 percent of the vegetarians. So if we were to become a vegan store, we'd go out of business, we'd cease to exist. And that wouldn't be good for the animals, for our customers, our employees, our stockholders, or anybody else. If I were to take Whole Foods in this direction I would be removed as CEO."

Mackey is, by all accounts, fiercely competitive. Years ago, the traditional executive-retreat volleyball games had to be scrapped, owing to Mackey's intensity and his ill-disguised scorn for less capable teammates. (Mackey says that he simply got too old for volleyball.) Still, cutthroat competitiveness is pretty much the norm among corporate bosses and successful entrepreneurs. So is a taste for self-assertion, and a wake of bruised feelings and thwarted dreams.

Certainly, Mackey's relationships with many former colleagues seem fraught. They won't talk about him on the record, out of concern for propriety, ongoing business dealings, or non-disclosure and non-disparagement agreements they signed when they left. (It is ironic that a company so outspoken about transparency has produced a diaspora of such wary silence.) But one gathers—from their demurrals, Mackey's own comments, and other reports—that Mackey can be hard to work for, that he has perhaps inherited his father's talent for hurtful direct talk, and that, while he may be, as he used to say, an "accidental grocer," he is not always



W A R P

"The killer had to be a man. Not only is the knife still bloody—it wasn't even put in the sink."

an accidental accumulator or practitioner of power. Of all the grocers who came to Whole Foods after it purchased their businesses, only Walter Robb remains.

Mackey has experimented with various modes of self-discovery. During one group session of breathing exercises, Mackey reexperienced his birth—"I was a Cesarean." Afterward, some of his Grofian friends suggested that he look at a book called "A Course in Miracles," written anonymously by two Columbia psychologists. The book's first printing, in 1976, had been financed by Reed Erickson, a wealthy transsexual living in Mexico.

The friends described the Course as a channelling from Jesus, and Mackey assumed that it was baloney. He'd gone through a Christian phase for two years, in his late teens (he'd had a crush on a devout girl), but had since become an atheist. He took up the Course in order to refute it. "I was reading the text one day and getting ready to go argue with my friends, and I came upon this statement in the text that just blew my mind. It said—I'm paraphrasing—it said, Lifetime after lifetime after lifetime you have been angry at God. You have blamed God for all the problems in the world," he says in "Passion and Purpose." "And not once have you ever looked at the real source—you and all your brothers and sisters have created this state of being that you're in. Not God. God is just pure love. . . . I got up. I started running around my house, because when I read it, it intuitively rang true for me."

He became a student of the Course. "This particular reality that we're in is not the only reality that exists," he goes on in "Passion and Purpose." "In fact, there are an infinite number of realities."

The Course places a strong emphasis on forgiveness. After his Grofian epiphany two years ago, Mackey set out to repair sundered relationships with his mother (posthumously), former lovers, and ex-colleagues. Only one remains: a woman he lived with before he married Deborah. "She scares me a little bit," he told me. "She's a very powerful woman." On the CD, he talks about a two-day visit with a former Whole Foods executive in South Carolina, who subjected him to a catalogue of grievances. Geographical deduction indicates that the South Carolinian was Peter Roy, the former president, whose departure from the company,

eleven years ago, had been particularly contentious. (Roy declined to comment.)

"He needed a chance to just unload," Mackey told me. "It's not much fun to have somebody do that, particularly when you don't agree. But you know what? It was very healing for him to do that. I gave him an opportunity to tell me why he thinks I'm such a jerk." He went on, "There's also a Course of Miracles saying—and this is such a wise piece of wisdom—would you rather be right or would you rather be happy? Most people would rather be right, but that's bad strategy. So my guy thinks I'm wrong and I'm pretty sure he's wrong. What difference does it make? I just go in and say, You're right, I'm wrong, and then you have the basis for healing."

"But you have a reputation for liking to argue," I said to Mackey.

"But I don't like to argue to be right. I like to argue because that's how I get to the truth. I think dialectically."

Would Mackey rather be right or happy? Or would he, to put it differently, rather the mission succeed or the business flourish? Survival is hardly assured. A grocer typically owns no patents and is vulnerable to a fickle marketplace. Mackey was determined, in the late nineties, to build an Internet operation—to become the Amazon.com of natural and organic foods—but the project came to naught. The Wild Oats merger was a dud. Last fall, as the recession deepened, Whole Foods' sales, and its stock, suffered badly, and the company was forced to raise capital. Leonard Green & Partners, a private-equity firm, bought seventeen per cent of the business, and got two seats on the board. Yucaipa, a firm run by the grocery billionaire and Democratic Party donor Ron Burkle, bought a seven-per-cent stake and has been looking over Mackey's shoulder.

"It's like asking a parent, How would you feel if your kid was dead when you were eighty-six years old?" Mackey said. "Would I prefer Whole Foods to be very successful and people still ate terrible food and were getting heart disease and cancer and diabetes when they didn't have to? I fundamentally don't believe you have to get those diseases. Or Whole Foods has gone bankrupt, but yet the world's health is far better and every-

body's eating a healthier diet? I'd rather have the second one. Absolutely."

One wonders. Wal-Mart is now the biggest retailer of organic groceries, carrying, among other products, Stonyfield. Hirshberg said, "Wal-Mart being in the organic- and natural-food space presents a real conundrum for John. On the one hand, he is justifiably proud of the revolution he helped launch. But seeing the same products in both markets can drive him crazy."

Mackey acknowledged that "Whole Foods has to continually evolve and get better or we'll get passed up. And that's the way capitalism is." He cited A. & P., which was the biggest grocer in America before undergoing a precipitate decline. "What matters is that whatever value we've created gets injected into the DNA of other companies and the economic system as a whole. Just like, speaking as a biological metaphor, Hey, your kids are here to replace you. Your DNA will move on, but you yourself will be eliminated. Whole Foods will someday die. Everything does. I'd rather mine not die while I'm still alive."

A third option is that the mission and Whole Foods both flourish, but without Mackey. Companies have a way of outgrowing their founders. A few weeks ago, I met Mackey again, in New York, at a midtown bar. He was between appearances on financial cable-news programs, to talk about fourth-quarter earnings. He had on a dark suit and pleather shoes, and was drinking sparkling water.

I asked him whether he'd given thought to what might come after him. "I don't have any plans to leave anytime soon, no matter how much the unions would like me to," he said. Talk turned to food, as it often does. "You only love animal fat because you're used to it," he said. "You're addicted." He urged me to consider reprogramming my palate. He also suggested that I try Grofian breathing.

After a moment, he got up to leave, and I watched him walk toward Sixth Avenue, in a suit that looked a size or two too big, thinking, or not thinking, about what he was going to say on the Fox Business channel. ♦

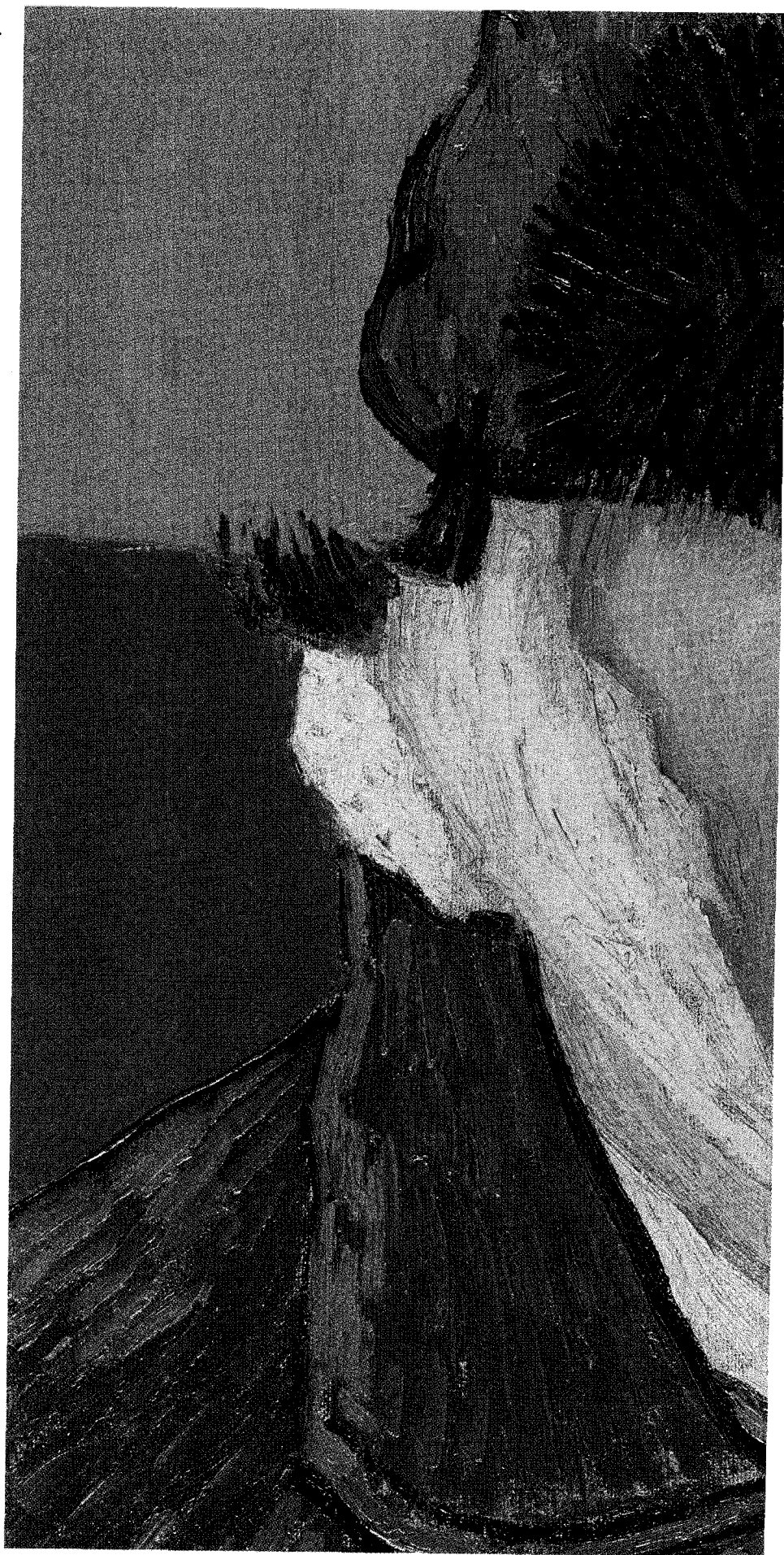
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Nick Paumgarten in a live chat with readers.

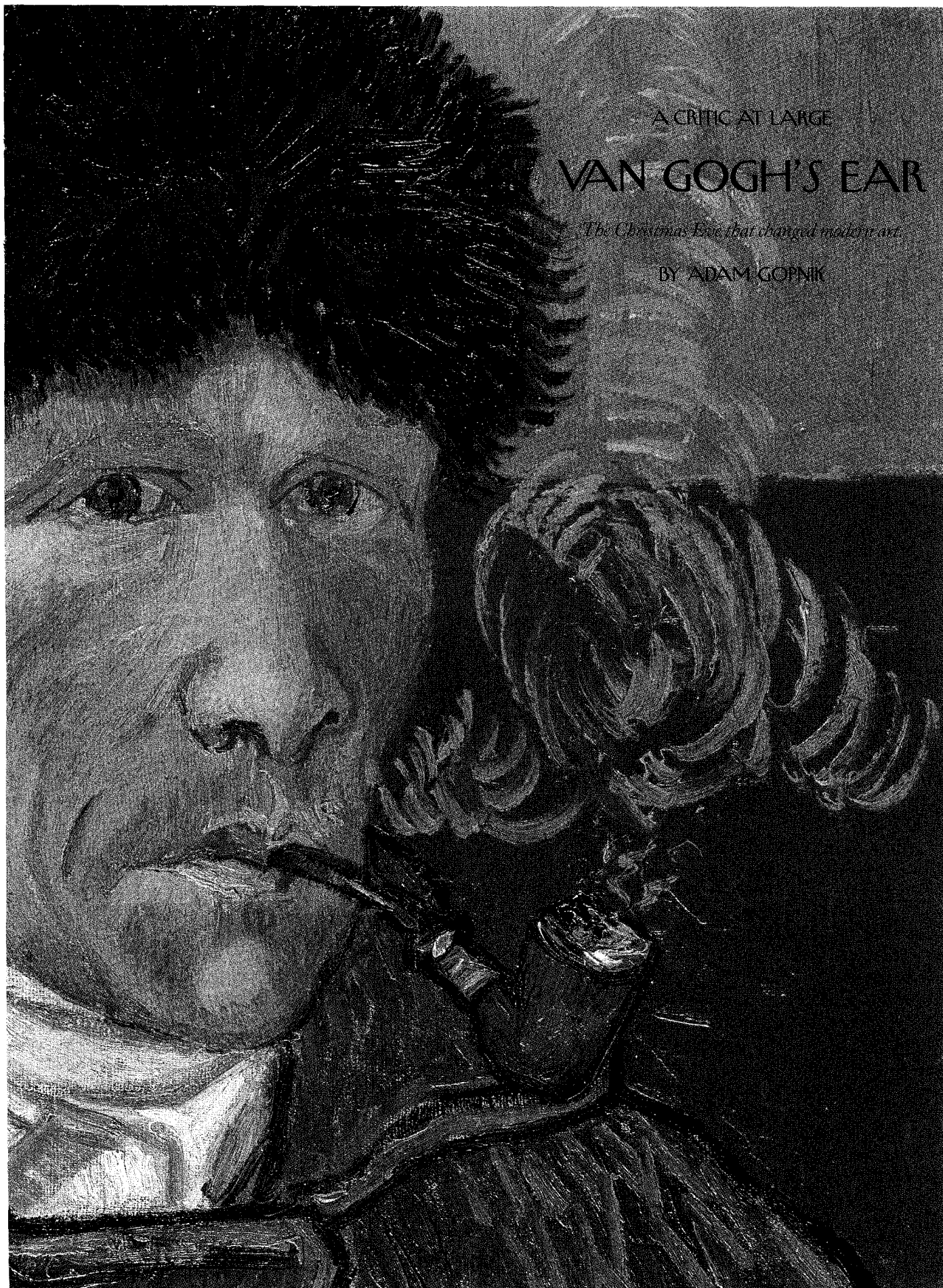
It is, in its strange way, at once the Nativity fable and the Passion story of modern art. On Christmas Eve, 1888, in the small Provençal town of Arles, the police found a young Dutch émigré painter in his bed, bleeding from the head, self-bandaged and semi-conscious, in a run-down residence called, for its peeling exterior, the Yellow House. A few hours before, the Dutchman had given his severed ear—or just its lower lobe; stories differed—to a whore named Rachel in a *maison de tolérance*, a semi-legal bordello, as a kind of early Christmas gift. (She had passed out upon unwrapping it.) The painter, Vincent van Gogh, was known throughout the town as a crazy drunk who hung around the whorehouses too much for his own good, and who shared the squalid Yellow House with another so-called artist, even scarier than he was, though not usually as drunk and not so obviously crazy. That other artist, Paul Gauguin—after being interviewed by the police, and insisting that his friend must have sliced off his own ear in a fit—then sent a telegram to the Dutchman's brother, urging him to come at once. Then Gauguin left for Paris, as fast as the trains could carry him, never to return.

Gauguin wound up in the South Seas, where he became the first modern “primitive”; van Gogh was hospitalized, then gently urged by his loving younger brother Theo into an insane asylum in nearby Saint-Rémy, where he painted the sequence of pictures—including “The Starry Night” and “Cypresses”—that today, shown in any museum, attract crowds larger than the entire population of Arles on that night. When, after van Gogh's suicide, in 1890, his fame grew, and the story of the severed ear began to circulate, it became a talisman of modern painting. Before that moment, modernism in the popular imagination was a sophisticated recreation; afterward, it was a substitute religion, an inspiring story of sacrifices made and sainthood attained by artists willing to lose their sanity, and their ears, on its behalf.

Last year, though, to front-page headlines around the world, two reputable German academics, Hans Kaufmann and Rita Wildegans, published a book offering a very different account of what happened that night. In “Van Goghs Ohr: Paul Gauguin und der Pakt des



“Self-Portrait with Bandaged Ear and Pipe” (1889). Before the moment that van Gogh



A CRITIC AT LARGE

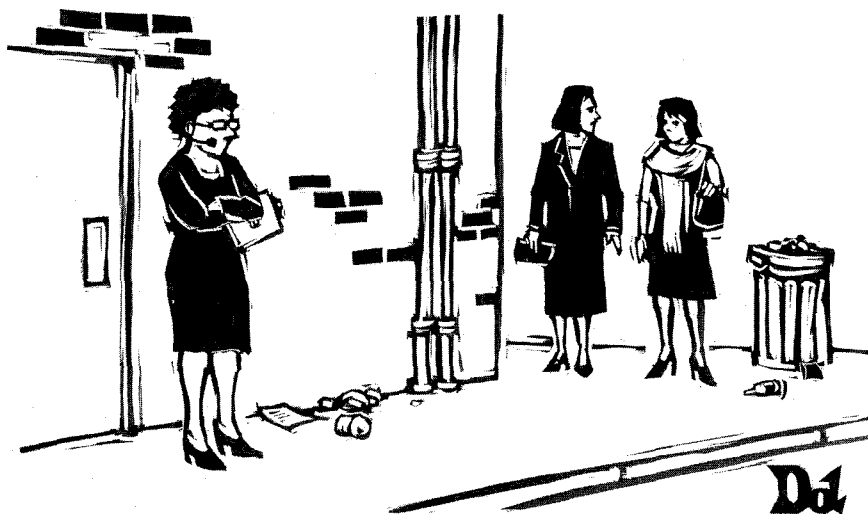
VAN GOGH'S EAR

The Christmas Eve that changed modern art

BY ADAM GOPNIK

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...vered his ear, modernism in the popular imagination was a sophisticated recreation; afterward, it was a substitute religion.



"I'm positive. This is the location for the Tupperware after party."

Schweigens" ("Van Gogh's Ear: Paul Gauguin and the Pact of Silence"), they argue that it was Gauguin who sliced off van Gogh's ear, with a sword that he carried with him for self-defense, and that the two artists—out of shame on van Gogh's part, guilt on Gauguin's—decided to keep the truth to themselves.

It's tempting, and not altogether wrong, to dismiss the question as trivial, or beside the point. But ears do not haunt ages without reasons. It may be that there is a true parable of modern art in the gruesome little story, different from both the old one and its revision. The Christmas crisis had a real, if buried, effect on van Gogh's imagination, turning him from a dream of living and working with a community of brother artists to one of painting for an unknown audience that might someday appear—a fantasy that was, in the end, and against the odds, not a fantasy at all.

Already a weather-beaten thirty-four when he arrived in Arles, Vincent van Gogh had been brought up in a grim Dutch village, one about equally divided professionally between clergymen and art dealers. His father was one of those clergymen, but his beloved Uncle Cent was an art dealer, and got him a job, when he was just sixteen, with an international art dealer in The Hague. The dealer soon sent him to London, where he fell in love with English literary culture. Van Gogh remained high Victo-

rian in imagination. Dickens and the *Punch* cartoonists and illustrators were a touchstone for him throughout his life, and inspired in him the possibility that portraiture with a bright caricatural intensity might be more persuasive than subdued point-by-point realism. After he had the first in a series of breakdowns, in 1874, this one set off by a failed love affair, he tried to cure his heartache in the traditional way, by going to Paris, but he soon made a dash back to Holland. He tried and failed to become a minister, and then, finally, at his brother Theo's urging, in 1879 accepted the truth that the one thing in life he did well was paint and draw. (Theo had also taken a job at the art dealer's, and was making a success of it.)

Those early wanderings made van Gogh the most literary of all the modern painters. Fluently trilingual—in English, French, and Dutch—he read compulsively and he read everything. Maupassant, Zola, Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert: he used words as a model for picture-making. And then he is the narrator of his own condition. Twenty years' worth of his letters, published in a spectacular illustrated six-volume edition, by Thames & Hudson, are the longest, warmest, most attentive account of an artist's life seen from the inside that has ever been written. If Trollope, as someone said, demonstrates that sanity need not be philistine, van Gogh demonstrates that insanity need not be insular.

The stripping away of conventional decorum that van Gogh's illness forced on him made him almost unnaturally *present*, alert to the world; when his mind went wrong, he became all heart.

He was a late bloomer. If he had left only the pictures that he painted before he came to Paris, as a thirty-two-year-old, in 1886—earnest, dark, clumsy pictures of peasants and potato eaters, modelled on Millet—no one but a handful of Dutch art historians would remember him. It was in Paris, on the *petits boulevards*, that his eyes were opened to the light. He drank in Impressionist color like oxygen. Perhaps the new palette came naturally to him because, as the art historian Debora Silverman argued in her superb study of a decade ago, "Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art," his motives were essentially religious; he saw it not as a formal choice but as a conversion experience. Bright verdant greens and strange acid blues and, above all, weird peasant yellows—he saw the Paris sun as peasant yarn.

When he left for Arles, in 1888, he had several motives, all mixed. He hoped that the South would improve both his sex life and his spiritual life; he seemed to have imagined it as a place of beautiful pious prostitutes. The Arlésiennes were famously the most bewitching women in Europe, and van Gogh, who approached women with obsession, trepidation, appetite, and a complete inability to put himself over, was eager to try his luck. As Silverman points out, he wanted his pictures to be sacred, but he also wanted them to be "spermatic"—sublimated explosions of a sexual vitality that he could rarely achieve in life.

Most of all, van Gogh was in pursuit of an old romantic dream: the dream of a collaborative community. Art could be saved from mere commodity if artists lived and worked together as they once had done. The Nazarenes, a secretive sect of painters in Rome in the early nineteenth century, seem to have been the first to revive the ideal, while John Ruskin's Guild of St. George, a pseudo-Gothic band of pseudo-Gothic Masons, became, in the eighteen-sixties, the most unintentionally comic. The Impressionists, urban painters par excellence, saw themselves at moments as a band of brothers, but theirs was an infantile form of community. Renoir and Monet played

and painted side by side like two-year-olds, rather than fully engaging in a club like twelve-year-olds. The idea that van Gogh, and others of his generation, pursued was deeper: a sort of religious revival that might be found in a renewed monastic arrangement.

The vision of an ideal community runs through the letters. If we could all work together, we'd be like . . . Icelandic fishermen! Buddhist monks! Peasant craftsmen! Members of the French Foreign Legion! Not long after he arrived in Arles, he wrote to Gauguin, "I must tell you that even while working I never cease to think about this enterprise of setting up studio with yourself and me as permanent residents, but which we'd both wish to make into a shelter and a refuge for our pals at moments when they find themselves at an impasse in their struggle."

In those first spring months in Arles, van Gogh worked feverishly to prepare a welcome for Gauguin, a successful stockbroker who had abandoned bourgeois respectability for avant-garde art. "I regret having spent money on this chest of drawers, but it can save us buying a dearer one," he wrote to Theo, who was now working as a dealer in Paris, with his future wife, Jo. "And when Gauguin comes, he would in any case have to have something there to put his linen in, and anyway his bedroom will be more complete like this."

When Gauguin comes. Gauguin, whom van Gogh had met only briefly, in Paris, had made a reputation painting up north, in the Breton country; he had also made a name as a tough guy, an original, an adventurer, the real thing. Throughout the first spring in Arles, disappointment followed disillusion; those Arlésiennes turned out to be pretty ordinary—"More Mignard than Mantegna," he reported with witty despondence (Mignard was a flashy society painter). Van Gogh's efforts to live cheaply led him to rent the Yellow House, only to find out, pathetically, that he couldn't rent a bed for the house, or even buy one on an installment plan. Yet the dream of Gauguin's arrival kept him buoyant.

In the end, kindhearted Theo basically had to bribe Gauguin to go to Arles and live with his brother, advancing him money on sales that had not yet happened. Gauguin arrived at last, grum-

bling and unwilling, in the fall of 1888. Things went well enough at first, although Gauguin's crudeness put van Gogh off a bit. He reported to Theo, in the tone of innocent exclamatory delight that makes him so touching:

He makes a really interesting friend—I must tell you that he knows how to cook *perfectly*, I think that I'll learn that from him, it's really convenient.

In another letter, to his friend Émile Bernard, he wrote:

Gauguin interests me greatly as a man—greatly. For a long time it has seemed to me that in our filthy job as painters we have the greatest need of people with the hands and stomach of a laborer. More natural tastes—more amorous and benevolent temperaments—than the decadent and exhausted Parisian man-about-town. Now here, without the slightest doubt, we're in the presence of an unspoiled creature with the instincts of a wild beast.

Even more exciting, Gauguin seemed to take seriously the great subject of that commune: "I tell you that our discussions

are tending to deal with the terrific subject of an association of certain painters." There was something erotic, ardent, if unrealized, about van Gogh's excitement in Gauguin's presence. He was acutely aware of his own sexual inadequacy, especially in comparison with Gauguin's hyperactive sex life: even when they were paying for sex at the brothel, van Gogh admitted ruefully, Gauguin got more value for his franc. Van Gogh eventually painted two wonderful symbolic portraits of the artists as their chairs: Gauguin's is robust, lit by a candle, van Gogh's is armless and small. It requires no doctrinaire Freudian to see significant form in the contrast of the erect and flaming candle that sits on Gauguin's chair with the crumpled, flower-shaped handkerchief on van Gogh's.

Yet Gauguin's pictures were on the whole more remote, van Gogh's more immediately sensual. Gauguin's paintings, in Arles as in Brittany, share some of the language of symbolism, a taste for



"It's a mixed-use facility: retail space, low-rent housing, luxury apartments, and an area set aside for making steel."

bright “folk” color married to religious ambitions. Made from memory rather than from the motif, they have what van Gogh called an “abstract” quality: a picture like Gauguin’s “Women from Arles in the Public Garden,” painted while they shared the house, is self-consciously asserting the likeness of the peasant women to the lost classical past—full of obvious references, in its flat processional shapes, to classical friezes and wan neo-classical revivals. Van Gogh, though he used a similar palette, had embarked on a very different task of “sacred realism,” entirely abandoning the myth kitty of allegory and fable and reference. It was just people and things painted with such intensity of feeling, and in such wild and unnatural colors, that they became sacred-seeming. He overestimates his objects—the postman is like Socrates! the old lady is a sibyl and the baby is a sage!—without overloading his allego-

ries. His inability to join the living doesn’t erode his delight in life. A core of plain Northern common sense sits within the drunken Southern colors. When you see a Gauguin, you think, This man is living in a dream world. When you see a van Gogh, you think, This dream world is living in a man.

What went wrong, after that happy interlude of cooking and painting and whoring? Why did it end with mutilation and alienation? Mostly, it has been put down to the evil character of Gauguin, but a lot of it, as Martin Gayford reveals in his 2006 study, “The Yellow House,” has to do with the exasperating character of van Gogh. Lovable as he is on the page, we forget how exhausting he must have been to live with—a man without a stop or even a pause button on his console. To get an idea of what an evening with him was like, you

have to imagine someone sitting down, opening a bottle of absinthe, and reading a van Gogh letter out loud to you—and then another, and then another and another and another. You couldn’t turn down the volume; all you could do was pull out the plug. Sooner or later, people, women particularly, always did—yanked the plug out of the wall—leaving him mute and miserable.

Gauguin was the last man in the world with the patience and humor necessary to get the best out of van Gogh. Van Gogh’s image of Gauguin is uncannily like Scott Fitzgerald’s of Hemingway, thirty years later—he saw him as a “natural man,” a fighter and a beast—with the parallel complication that the tough guy could hold his liquor and the tender guy could not. In truth, Gauguin was cynical, cheap, and utterly self-centered. And he was mean—mean financially but mean personally, too, bad-tempered and constantly discouraging. (When one of his children fell from the third story, he buried the news in the second paragraph of a letter to van Gogh and complained chiefly about the costs.) “With Gauguin, blood and sex have the edge over ambition” was van Gogh’s generous formula, but his definition of these terms as the equation of his friend’s soul suggests his uneasy knowledge that, while he had the terms right, he might have the equation backward.

Gauguin was such a no-goodnik that he became the occasion of an influential philosophical essay on blame and praise, Bernard Williams’s 1976 “Moral Luck.” Arguing against the assumption that we can’t judge people for things beyond their control, Williams points out that Gauguin’s is a prime real-life case where doing the wrong thing—abandoning your wife and children and betraying your friends—appears to be morally justifiable, since the art made was, as it happened, great. Moral assessment, Williams suggests, has a strong component of sheer contingency and chance. You run a red light and no one notices; I run a red light and hit an old lady and I’m the worst guy in the world. Gauguin reminds us that morality has a mysterious fatality about it. His decision to abandon his family for art looks heroic, in retrospect, because luck was a lady—a muse—who blew on his dice.

What Williams didn’t entirely regis-



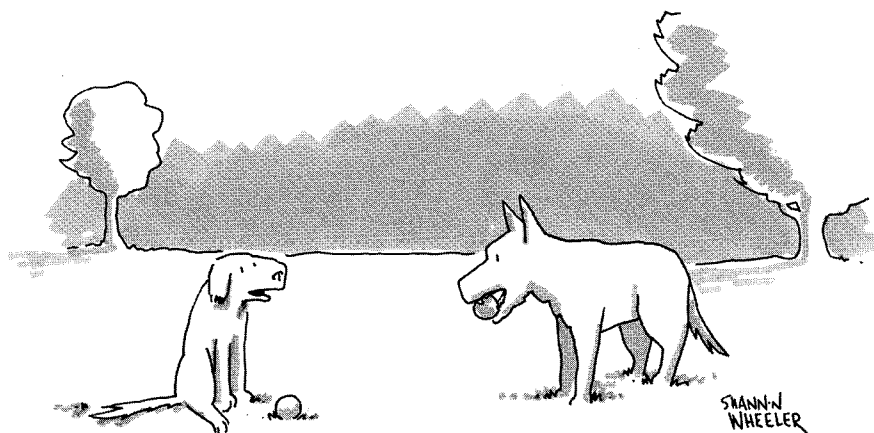
“I’m going to take your blood pressure, so try to relax and not think about what a high reading might mean for your chances of living a long, healthy life.”

ter, though, was that Gauguin isn't just one artist plucked at random out of time, a desperado in a line stretching back to Pygmalion. He's not just an instance of moral luck; he is an inventor of moral luck. He is a model modern artist, and modern art is in many ways *about* moral luck, about the search for it, about raising the stakes to see if it can happen. Modern art makes its own moral luck.

This is evident in the element of chance and randomness inserted into design by painters like Arp and Pollock, but, beyond that, it is evident in the larger urge, shared by poets and writers, to make a career of violations, risks, wagers. Gauguin is the original of the type, of whom Picasso is the most famous realization, of the artist as gambler—the solitary risk-taker, indifferent to anyone's welfare but his own and therefore capable of acts of independence and originality unknown to timid, orderly, nice people, acts that thrill and inspire new acts a century later. It is the *goal* of that kind of modern artist to run the red light and hit the old ladies—the old ladies of custom and convention. Where art since the Renaissance had attempted to limit luck in a system of inherited purpose and patterns, modern art demands that you press the pedal as hard as you can, and pray.

So what really happened? The conventional story is that, sometime on the night of December 23rd, Gauguin stormed out of the house after a quarrel and made for the brothel, or just for the night air. Van Gogh had been talking him to death—about the commune, the meaning of art, the nature of sex—and Gauguin withdrew, as he did more and more often, into a laconic bearishness. Walking down the street, he heard someone call his name and, he claimed later, turned to see van Gogh gesticulating wildly with a razor. Van Gogh approached, and then turned away, in self-dismay. Early the next morning, Christmas Eve, Gauguin found him bandaged, and concluded, as everyone else has since, that Vincent had turned the razor on himself and, in a fit of morbid exhibitionism, delivered the severed part to his favorite prostitute, before returning home to bandage his head and pass out.

The revisionist story, as the German historians tell it, begins with Gauguin's skill as a fencer. (It was part of his tough-



"Are you happy with your current ball?"

guy persona.) He had brought his foils to Arles, and there is reason to think that he carried his sword late at night; Arles could be a seamy place. "In a heated surge of emotion, he pulls out his rapier and makes several lightning-fast fencing moves in Vincent's direction," Wildegans and Kaufmann relate. "He must bring this crazy man to his senses, keep him at a distance! Vincent jerks to the side; he feels a stinging pain in his left ear that makes him fall abruptly silent. He grabs at the area: where is his ear? His hand is bloody. He sees something light lying on the ground. In shock, he picks up the cut-off ear, holds it up to Gauguin, who is frozen, and says, 'You are silent. Indeed, I will be, too.'"

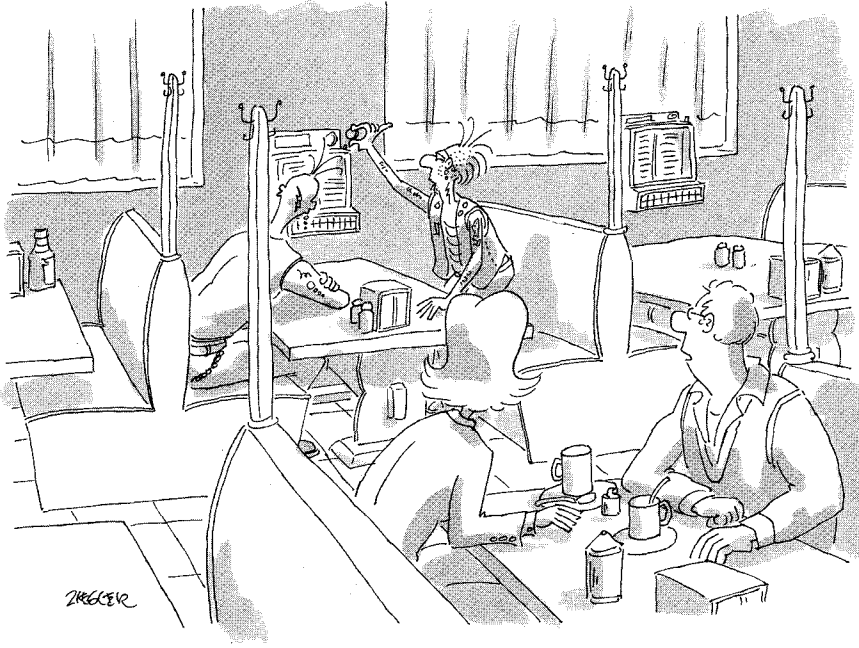
This version is reinforced by several arresting scraps of evidence. One is the surgical-seeming neatness of the slice. Self-mutilation has a long and sad history, and it has even taken van Gogh's name: it's called van Gogh syndrome in the medical textbooks. But it seems that almost no one has ever done what van Gogh did: sufferers mutilate their arms and hands and legs and chests, but they don't mutilate their ears. (Of course, they are rarely quite so self-consciously aware of their ears as van Gogh, the obsessive self-portrait painter, was. He kept a template of his head in his mind.)

Another clue is the cryptic, half-buried references that crop up afterward in the writings of both men. There is, for a start, the hushed, regretful tone of van Gogh's later allusions to the night, which seem more sadly ironic than self-incriminating. "Happily Gauguin, I, and other

painters aren't yet armed with machine guns and other dangerous war weapons," he wrote to Theo. And in a letter to Gauguin, delicately suggesting that he would return the fencing equipment Paul had left behind in his rush to get away, he said, with what seems like an enigmatic point, "I'll pluck up the courage in a few days. . . . Those terrible engines of war will wait until then. I now write to you very calmly, but I haven't yet been able to pack up all the rest."

In the end, much depends on the meaning of a single word: "ictus." It's known to have been a kind of talisman passed between the two artists, said in greeting and farewell. It's found, with a little drawing of a fish, in a letter van Gogh wrote to Gauguin just after the Christmas crisis. Gauguin continued to write it, semi-compulsively, in notes that refer to van Gogh after his departure, and returned to it often, even in the next year. "Saul. Paul. Ictus," he writes in notes that seem obviously to refer to van Gogh, and alongside the phrase "The murderer took flight."

Ictus (or *ichthys*) is Greek for "fish," and it has always been held by scholars to be a reference by the two artists to the practices of the primitive Christians—who used the fish as an acrostic symbol for their sect—and to their own charmed community. It was a half-serious greeting between the two: we are sufferers now, we shall be saints anon. But the German historians argue that the Latin word *ictus* is also a common term in French fencing, meaning a blow or hit. This second, punning sense, they



"Uh-oh."

suggest, would have been in the front of the mind of a fencer like Gauguin, referring, a little reproachfully, to his instinctive act in countering van Gogh's razor with his sword. Their smoking gun, or bloody sabre, is a cryptic sketch that Gauguin made in 1889 of a snail-shaped form that looks oddly like a severed ear, with the word "Ictus" written inside it; in the same sketch are what resemble, they argue, fencing diagrams.

Greek code or Latin cry? The secret password of a collaborative community or a call of triumph after a competitive thrust? Trust or trespass? The new story is suggestive without being entirely convincing. Whichever side we take, though, we can't help recognizing a descant central to the modern tradition. You always begin with a dream of community—Braque and Picasso in the bohemian hermitage Bateau Lavoir; the handful of painters brave enough to go abstract in the Cedar Tavern—and end with a reality of competitiveness and assault, suspicion and estrangement.

For van Gogh, the story ends conclusively: the Yellow House empty, the dream of community gone, the asylum's doors the only ones open to him. He left the hospital in January and returned to the town, but his behavior was so strange that the people of Arles put together a

petition to have him committed to an asylum or sent back to his family—breaking for good the vestiges of his dream of an organic rural community. Arles was as tight and closed and suspicious as any other small town. In his letters, the old fantasy, the fishermen and the monks, disappears, and the one time that he mentions it there is a new and sadly chastened tone. To Theo he wrote:

Poor egotist that I've always been and still am now, I can't shake off this idea, which, however, I've already explained to you two or three times, that it's thus for the best that I go into an asylum right now. It will perhaps turn out all right in the end. . . . However, the fact that the idea of an association of painters, of housing them together, some of them, although we haven't succeeded, although it's a deplorable and painful failure—this idea remains true and reasonable—like so many others. BUT NO BEGINNING AGAIN.

Yet the Christmas crisis proved instructive, too. "Among artists, we no longer know what to say to each other, we don't know if we ought to laugh or cry about it, and doing, my word, neither one thing nor the other, we are happiest when we find ourselves in possession of a little paint and canvas, the thing we also lack sometimes," he wrote to his sister Willemien from Saint-Remy. "But any idea of a regular life, any idea of awakening in ourselves or in others gentle ideas or sensations, all of this must necessarily

appear pure utopia to us." In van Gogh's last letters, there is a subdued realism, like that of Shakespeare's heroes in the fifth act, when death is certain and the readiness is all. (In Saint-Remy, he settled in to read and reread Shakespeare. "Have you ever read King Lear?" he asked her. He had.) He went on:

Alas, we often lack breath and faith, wrongly certainly but—and here we come back to the point—if, however, we want to work we must submit both to the stubborn harshness of the time and to our isolation, which is sometimes as hard to bear as exile. Now before us, after our years which have thus been lost, relatively speaking, poverty, illness, old age, madness and always exile.

Nor is the reference to madness and exile random. It's easy to overlook, for example, that throughout his crisis he kept with him the Christmas books of his beloved Dickens—"A Christmas Carol," "The Chimes"—which are essentially tales of men who go crazy as a result of hallucinations suffered in Christmas week, and who are led to self-renewal through violent acts of self-transformation. ("The Chimes," in particular, with its theme of a man nearly driven mad by an auditory hallucination, could not have been far from his mind.)

The only authentic community he found was among the insane. At least they supported one another. "Although there are a few people here who are seriously ill, the fear, the horror that I had of madness before has already been greatly softened," he wrote to Theo's new wife, Jo. "And although one continually hears shouts and terrible howls as though of the animals in a menagerie, despite this the people here know each other very well, and help each other when they suffer crises." Artists could not be fishermen, or monks, or Legionnaires. They were artists. Collaborative creativity? We live and see and work alone. Collective responsibility? It ends in a crazy house. "I'm thinking of squarely accepting my profession as a madman just as Degas took on the form of a notary." And elsewhere, around the same time, he wrote, "One must seize the reality of one's fate and that's that."

Those words shine in his pictures. We tend to see the arc of his work, from the departure from Paris, in early 1888, to his death, in 1890, as more or less continuous, and miss the decisive break marked

by the Christmas crisis. Even through the pictures of 1888 he's still mostly a prose painter, with something of the nineteenth-century illustrator in him—children, postmen, absinthe-soaked café scenes. He still wanted to be Dickens or Daumier. After the Christmas crisis, he accepted that he was only Vincent. His new pictures—"The Starry Night," "Cypresses," and the pictures of the gardens at Saint-Remy—are depopulated, emptied of any vision of common life. Where in 1888 the pictures are still filled with people on top of people—six people in the "Night Café," a dozen in the streets of Arles at night—in 1889, aside from his copies of Millet, van Gogh thinks only in solitary ones and lonely twos, the occasional individual portrait interrupting a world of visionary dailiness. He wrote, simply, "Let's not forget that small emotions are the great captains of our lives." Stars wheel, cypresses flame; the whole world comes alive. The common unity is the animism of the ordinary. "Starry Night Over the Rhone," of 1888, has the night sky gently decanted into the gaslight world of the town, and the theme is the likeness of streetlight and moonlight, the modern urban subject—the amusement park at night. In the 1889 "Starry Night," it's all night and stars and rolling nebulae: me and the night and the music of the spheres. He's a man alone, and for good.

Gauguin went on to Tahiti, to become—through his effect on Picasso and also on the entire Malraux-Hemingway generation—a central type of the modern artist. There is another kind of moral luck, though, appealed to by van Gogh in his late pictures and letters, different from the flamboyant self-creation of the more familiar Gauguin-Picasso sort. It is the moral luck of making something that no one wants in the belief that someone someday will. The letters of van Gogh's last year mark his acceptance of his isolation, coupled with the belief that the isolation need not be absolute—that, one day, there will be a community of readers and viewers who will understand him, and that his mistake had been to try and materialize that community in the moment instead of accepting it as the possible gift of another world and time. "One must seize the reality of one's fate and that's that." The

real community is not that of charmed artists living like monks but the distant dependencies of isolated artists and equally isolated viewers, who together make the one kind of community that modernity allows.

The turn toward moral luck puts modern art, however popular, at permanent odds with the society that delights in it. Whether in its benign, wishful form, or in its belligerent "Watch me!" aspect, the pursuit of moral luck remains alien to a liberal civilization that always, and usually intelligently, prefers compromise to courage, and morning meetings to evening dares. Even the shoppers and speculators who wager on the future value of a work of art are engaged at best in a kind of mimicry of the original risk. A society of sure things needs a mythology of long shots. To trust in luck is to be courageous, and courage, the one essential virtue, on which all others depend, is also the one ambiguous virtue, since it is morally neutral: jerks have it as often as gentlemen.

Some stories in history we want to have neatly finished; some we like to have always in play. We accept without too much trouble the ambiguity of the old and new stories because they add up to something similar in the end. Van

Gogh's ear makes its claim on the world's attention because it reminds us that on the outer edge of art there is madness to pity, meanness to deplore, and courage to admire, and we can't ever quite keep them from each other. Gauguin was a miserable moral gambler, and a maker of modernism; van Gogh was a self-mutilating madman, and a poet of all the visions. We accept an ambiguity in the story of van Gogh's ear because the act is itself ambiguous.

It's true that the moral luck dramatized by modern art involves an uncomfortable element of ethical exhibitionism. We gawk and stare as the painters slice off their ears and down the booze and act like clowns. But we rely on them to make up for our own timidity, on their courage to dignify our caution. We are spectators in the casino, placing bets; that's the nature of the collaboration that brings us together, and we can sometimes convince ourselves that having looked is the same as having made, and that the stakes are the same for the ironic spectator and the would-be saint. But they're not. We all make our wagers, and the cumulative lottery builds museums and lecture halls and revisionist biographies. But the artist does more. He bets his life. ♦

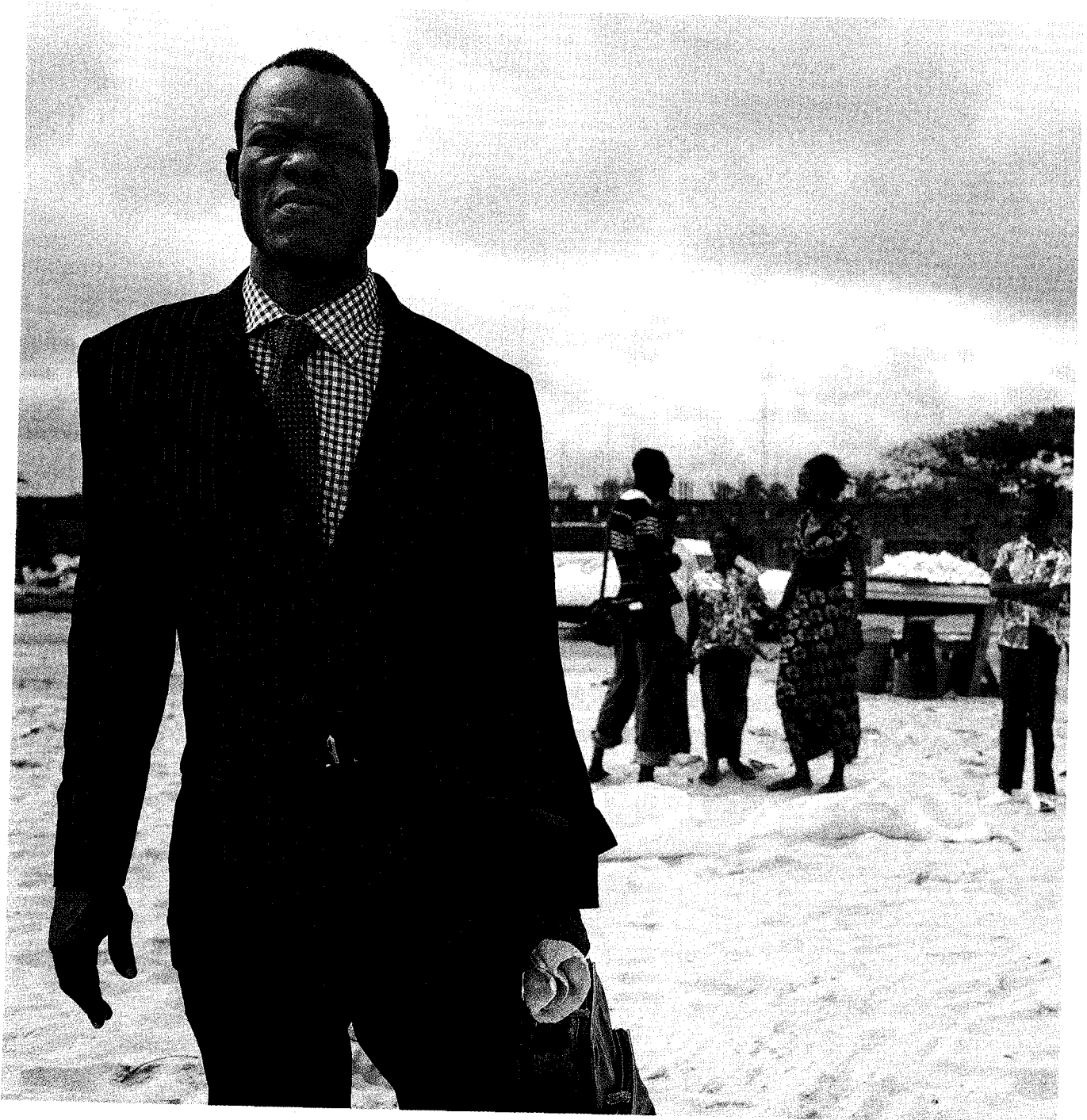


"Don't be so chintzy with the life line!"

FICTION

BAPTIZING THE GUN

BY UWEM AKPAN



A female passenger starts to scream in the *molue*, or you-beat-me-I-beat-you bus, in front of my battered red Volkswagen Beetle, introducing another ripple of confusion into the midmorning Lagos traffic. She jumps out. Squatting by the roadside, she tilts her head so that the blood dripping from her torn ear won't soil her yellow *onyonyo* dress. Someone had reached into the bus to steal her earring, tearing her ear in the process. A group of child hawkers, whose schools are on strike, gather around her, drumming consolations into the other ear. Each time I try to move my car, there are at least two motorcycles ahead of me. The traffic stops. Up front, there's a throng of people chanting and dancing. They carry amulets, clubs, and locally made hunting rifles. They're members of the Oodua People's Congress, or O.P.C. They say that Lagos belongs to the Yorubas, so all others should understand that they're just guests. They say they will not tolerate armed robbers or corrupt police anymore in Eko City, and that this year, 1999, it is their turn to rule Nigeria. Well, this madness could have happened in Onitsha or Abuja or Ughorodo, I console myself after waiting thirty minutes for them to pass. Besides, this isn't my first time in Lagos.

After an oil fire killed hundreds of my fellow swamp-dwellers in the Niger Delta, after the mass burials, after negotiating with the leaders of the scores of tribes that make up our church to insure that everybody's burial ritual was represented during our week of mourning, I came to Lagos two days ago to visit some rich parishes and beg for aid. Now I'm staying at my brother's place in Ikotun and driving his car. This morning, to my brother's surprise, I had already sniffed out the black-market petrol crooks. I told him the fuel scarcity wasn't going to stop me. I dipped my fingers into the liquid they were selling out of huge jars and smelled it—before buying. I *sure* know Lagosians, and Grandpa used to say, "If you know the people, you know the place."

Now, suddenly, people—even the drivers—are jumping out of *molues*, to see a boy struggling in a bonfire on the road. The earring thief has been caught, ringed with tires, doused in petrol, and set ablaze. There's great rejoicing by the mob, as if a goal had been scored in a soccer match. No matter how scarce fuel is,

there's always enough *for* the thief. My dashboard clock says 10:30. All the vehicles on the road attempt to turn at once. I should have listened to my brother and waited to go with his driver at the weekend. I should have put on my Roman collar, as my bishop likes his priests to do. Perhaps some Lagosian Catholic would have had mercy on me. Ah, no, such thoughts won't help me now. I smile to myself, to ward off the Area Boys who are beginning to take an interest in my confused driving. I wrangle my way through poor Isolo to St. Dominic's Parish, in crowded Yaba; and then to the Parish of Assumption, in highbrow Ikoyi. I see the blue tides of the Atlantic wash up in white effervescent bubbles. I come to industrial Apapa, to the Aje-gunle slums, and popular Surulere.

My journey has been fruitful; many parishes have promised to send money and materials to the Niger Delta. There are posters everywhere, heralding democracy. Even I can't suppress the excitement that in two months' time our country is going to have its first civilian election in sixteen years.

When I am on my way back from St. Leo's, in Ikeja, my car begins to choke in a gloomy, noisy suburb. Lord Jesus, please, don't let this car die on me here; I know very little about cars.

The Beetle dies—it's 18:03.

Around me, twilight begins to smoke upward like a ground mist, undoing the afternoon's saffron rays. People move very fast on the streets, their gaits self-aware. The residential area has a sprinkling of industrial complexes. All the compounds are surrounded by high fences, most of the walls wearing garlands of electric barbed wire. I look up and down the street—no immediate danger. I get out and push the dead Beetle off the road.

Then a rusty iron gate creaks open and a huge man pops into the twilight. This six-footer isn't hurrying home like other Lagosians. He's broad-shouldered and square-jawed. His head is shaved, big and bumpy, his neck powerfully built. Although the sun has gone down, he's wearing round dark glasses. He has on a black pin-striped suit, a blue hand-woven tie, and a Rolex watch, like my own. The triangular edge of his white handkerchief shows from his breast pocket. He bounces toward me. I move away, getting the car

in between us, pretending to be checking the tires, craftily hiding my Rolex. I beg God to take him away from me.

"It's like you got a problem, man," he says in a husky voice.

"Hmm . . . actually, no," I manage to say, looking away.

I can feel his eyes all over my car. I know immediately that he's a swindler.

"Man, you sure need help."

I smile. "No, please. I can manage."

When he returns my smile, I see that he has two gold lower teeth, which light up the gloom. "Got petrol?"

"More than half a tank."

"No problem, then. Let's push."

He offers to get into the driver's seat, but I get in fast, to be on the safe side. He goes to the back and pushes the car, sweating, hissing obscenities, yet the car doesn't start. I try to catch his accent, to work out what tribe or part of the country he's from. But a streak of an American accent in his voice makes it impossible.

"Please, where can I get a mechanic?"

I ask when he gives up on pushing.

"Lagos mechanics? Don't trust any Lagosian. I'm a Lagosian. Once they see you're a stranger, they'll cheat you or dismember and sell your car piecemeal, no matter how old. Just listen to me." He pushes the Beetle again. "O.K., let's see your engine," he says when we come to a junction. Fearfully, I open the hood. He bends down and disconnects a tube and hands it to me. "Suck this, man. The problem must be the fuel filter."

Suck? I've never fixed anything in a car before. Back at my parish, I have a driver. "I think we should get a mechanic."

"Damn it, man, you *don't* need a fucking mechanic!"

He takes off his sunglasses to reveal small, angry eyes. I grab the tube. Petrol gushes into my throat, and I let go of the tube, coughing. I puke on the front of my blue-and-white *buba* shirt. The petrol soaks into my clothes, its cold sting reaching the zipper of my jeans. Ignoring my state, he bends down again to study the engine.

I see a pistol bulging in the right pocket of his trousers.

Why didn't I wear my priestly habit? Why didn't I borrow one of those church vehicles with "Catholic Archdiocese of Lagos" emblazoned on its sides?

I begin to plead with the Lagosian. "Please, I'm a Roman Catholic priest and . . ."

"So? You Nigerian clerics just want everything free! You flash your status at every chance." When he talks, the two gold teeth burn in the night, as if he were chewing flames.

"Please, sir, don't be angry."

"Just suck this stuff, Father, man. It's very easy. Then close the opening with your thumb. Would have done it for you, but I don't want any dirt on my suit, O.K.?"

I reconnect the line with trembling hands. He beckons to a *mallam*, which is what Lagosians call the Hausa Muslim gatekeepers. The *mallam* is an old man, tall and skinny. He's sitting on a mat outside his wood-and-wire kiosk by a residential gate, selling cheap sweets, mosquito coils, pens, and chewing sticks, and listening to the BBC Hausa Service on a tiny transistor radio. The *mallam* removes his radio from his shoulder as delicately as if it were a parrot, and comes over, barefoot, his long white gown sweeping the ground. Together, they push the Beetle, down this street, up that street, into and out of potholes. The car starts. I want to drive away, but the road is a dead end. The Lagosian lumbers over and pokes his big head into my passenger seat's window and advises me never to turn the engine off. His eyes are scanning everything in the car.

"Thanks very much, sir," I say. "Very, very much. May Christ lead you home."

"Don't mention, Father."

He doesn't go away.

As I slowly put the car in reverse, he says, "Man, please, give a little something for Mallam. . . ."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. Thanks for reminding me." I scramble and give him a twenty-naira bill.

"Oh, man." He chuckles, collecting the money. "Your bills are so fresh and new. You priests are having a ball in this hard country! You need to lose weight."

The *mallam* smiles heartily and declines the money, saying his help is free. The Lagosian returns it to me. His hands are rough and wide, with big bony fingers and chewed nails. I thank him again. But he still doesn't go away. He smiles and moves his tongue over his gold teeth as if it were being

roasted. He reaches into the passenger seat and grabs my folded map of Lagos. He switches on the ceiling light.

"This map is outdated," he says with a suppressed laugh.

"I'll manage, I'll manage."

He wants to say something but is reluctant. He looks at his watch and sighs, tapping my front tire with his shoe. God, don't let him harm me. It's 20:14.

"Father, do you know your way home, man?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Ikotun . . . Ikotun Egbe."

"That's far from here."

"Yeah. I'm positive I'll do just fine. You have a good night. You're very kind."

He opens the door, squeezing his huge frame into my passenger seat, like a child in undersized clothes. "I'm coming with you," he says. "This oldie will give you hell tonight, man." He tells me how his mother-in-law's cousin's husband can't afford to buy tires for his old Beetle.

"Father, do you know the difference between rich Lagos and poor Lagos, according to one standup comedian?" He doesn't wait for an answer: "The billboards!"

"Really?"

"Yes. In Ikoyi, they're huge, impressive. You see a happy family advertising Kellogg's cereals, flat-screen TVs, Benson & Hedges and stuff." His fingers are tapping playfully on the dashboard. But I'm not deceived by this or by the way he tries to be friendly, pouring out every thought like a child. "But come to Amukoko and Ajegunle slums, man, and, apart from cigarette adverts, the native doctors and the fake prophets take over! You see: 'AIDS? Unemployment? Infertility? Our Herbal Home Has the Absolute Weapon!' Or 'Prophet General Something—Spiritual Warlord—Will Bomb Witches, Incessant Examination Failures, Infidelity

Out of Your Life.'" He allows himself a chuckle and then stops abruptly, turning to me. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. Just trying to make you relax."

I ignore him and pick up speed. I can't let him catch me off guard. I know he's one of those sleek 419ers or Yahoo-Yahoo Boys who spend their days writing fake business letters to Americans and Europeans, assuring them of millions of petrodollars in profit if they'll only release their credit-card and bank details. My eyes are on the road, my mind on him. My Beetle begins to sound like a wretched cassava mill. But I don't care anymore.

The car ahead of me swerves and climbs over something. I see a bundle of clothes and try to dodge it, almost ramming into another car, but my wheels still roll over part of it. The bundle feels soft, as if the car were climbing over a felled banana tree. The car behind me screeches and I see it swerving in the rearview mirror, but it drives over the bundle, too.

"That was a corpse, man."

"A corpse? What corpse?" I slow down to stop and switch on my indicators.

"Move on, damn it. Switch off your indicators!" He's chuckling cynically and patting my shoulder. "Calm down, Father."

"A hit-and-run?"

"Maybe. Or it might be a ritual corpse. These ritualists cut off the parts they want and toss the remains on the road. This city is unpredictable. Do you want me to drive?"

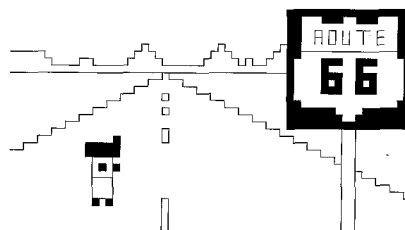
"No, thanks."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

"Then stop looking in the rear mirror, so we don't have an accident!"

I feel guilty about the corpse, and my bladder becomes heavy, pressing against my groin like a sack of stones. Laughing, he tells me that different body parts are required for different types of rituals, but that kidneys are useless, except as exports to rich countries for transplant. He warns me to be careful about using commercial vehicles, because body-part agents abduct their passengers. He says human asses are in hot demand now because the military generals are afraid of losing the seat of power to civilians; the sacrifice



of many asses at the right shrine could glue the generals' asses to their offices and destroy our hopes for democracy.

I try to stop again.

"What the fuck are you doing? Keep going, Father, man!"

"Please, I want to pee. Please, sir."

"And where are the public toilets? If you stop, we're screwed anyway! Hear how the Beetle is sounding?"

He apologizes for using an obscenity, and proceeds to talk, in a serious tone now, about providing his extended family member with new tires like mine. He tells me how your tribesmen make demands on you once you're rich. O.K., I see—he wants my Pirellis so that he'll be seen as a *generous* extended-family man. That's fine. I relax a bit now that he's no longer laughing his cynical laugh. For him, car tires are more important than human life or the dignity of a corpse. Well, he can take the whole car—everything. I can walk back to my brother's, or even the two hundred and fifty miles to the heart of the Niger Delta.

He looks at his watch, shrugs, and gives me a thumbs-up. "Father, oh-oh, I thought I saw you with a Rolex, just like mine." So the bastard saw my Rolex before I could hide it! I pretend not to hear him. "Why are you so afraid? I said I saw you with a watch!"

"You didn't."

"Really?"

"Positive."

He's quiet now and looks straight ahead, his eyes squinting to become two angry arrowheads. Occasionally he grimaces, as if he were biting down on the golden flames in his mouth. His fingers are no longer tapping on the dashboard but draped around his pointed knees. Sweat dribbles down his face. He reaches for the gun but changes his mind. With his left hand, he retrieves his breast-pocket handkerchief and wipes his face. He puts his shades back on. Now he looks like General Sani Abacha, who as head of state would sometimes begin his office hours at 22:00, always behind dark glasses. General Abacha died last year. Am I going to die tonight?

Maybe I should apologize and hand over the watch. What's a watch compared with life? Maybe I shouldn't have



"And that's when I realized that I much preferred making frothy desserts."

accepted the watch from the oil-company executive who attends my church in the first place.

My stomach feels like a grater, and my insides hurt as if they'd been shredded. Silently, I start saying the Rosary to calm myself down. First decade. Second decade. Third decade . . . This is a bad silence. The watch in my left back pocket is a malignant tumor, an unripe boil. It feels cold and quiet against my butt, yet I know it's ticking away, a countdown to my death and my corpse on the road. I shouldn't have lied. St. Christopher, Patron of Travelers, what do I tell this man?

I see a group of policemen and soldiers ahead, setting up a roadblock. They're well armed, members of Operation Sweep, the Lagos State anti-crime unit. They're flagging down cars. Thank God, I'm not wearing my Roman collar and I won't be automatically waved on. I slow down, working the accelerator and the clutch to insure that the engine doesn't cough out. Lord, I bless you for sending me these Good Samaritans!

"I'll kill you if you stop this car, damn it!"

I point up ahead. "Operation Sweep."

"Shit, man. They've blocked the road completely!"

He removes his sunglasses again. I pull up but leave the engine running. Passengers from other cars get out to catch some fresh air until the officers release the cars, one here, two there, like chickens set free at a shrine.

A soldier and a policeman approach us. The former has no shirt on, and his huge stomach hangs over his belt; the latter is as tall and powerfully built as my companion. They're so close to me that I can smell the gunpowder in the nozzles of their AK-47s. My passenger is more uncomfortable than I am.

"Please, Officers, check everything," I say, inviting them. "I mean everything—everywhere. Search both of us. You're doing a great job in Lagos. By the way, please, back there, there's a corpse on the road!"

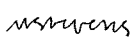
"I look like vulture to you?" the soldier says, slurring his words.

"Wetin concern me if corpse dey road?" the policeman says, the last part of the sentence exploding in a sneeze. A thick smell of alcohol sweeps my face. He staggers as if the sneeze has made him dizzy, his rifle nozzle clattering against my door. He raises his rifle again and smiles, as if to prove that he's sober.

I give him another bill. He turns his rifle upside down and blows into the nozzle to clear the dirt and then lurches over to other vehicles. I breathe

He's beginning to laugh again, but my mind is really on the corpse, which has become a picture of my immediate future. I should never have driven over it. It was my Pirelli tires that crushed it. Meanwhile, the Lagosian's passion for my tires seems to have expunged the Operation Sweep encounter from his

I smile a toothless smile. "Well, that's my place, too!"



"Bad news, hon. I got replaced by an app."

He smiles in turn and is as relaxed as he was before I lied to him about the Rolex. Now he may let me off. He's not sweating anymore, and his back is resting against the seat. He's at home with me now, and this time his silence is serene, as if he were going to sleep. His face is turned up, his nose almost touching the roof of the car, his throat arched and vulnerable, his eyes closed. He puts his left arm around my seat, and starts whistling, a soft pulsing sound that calms the heart and flows into the chaos outside.

"You're my brother, then!" the Lagosian finally exclaims, nudging me and opening his eyes as if waking from a peaceful dream.

He extends his arm. "Did you have a good day?" he asks, as he vigorously shakes my hand.

"A good day? Yes, yes."

"Mine was trashy. Nothing worked for me—which is why I must get something out of this trip."

"Really?"

"I must. I won't give up on you."

I wonder what he means by that. I shrug and say, "Sometimes we take things out on innocent people."

"No, no, no, I hate those who exploit others!" He sits up again, as if the Devil had just tickled his spine. "Man, you know something then about injustice and exploitation. You know something about your environment being destroyed. God has cursed us with oil, man. Never again will our people suffer as they did these forty years of oil drilling. We'll go to war! What do you think?"

I decide that it's best to agree with him. "We will," I say.

"Good, Father! These days, every month I send money back home to our militia, so they can defend our fatherland. Those youths putting their lives on the line need better guns, and they need our support against Mobil and Shell and our government."

"My brother, definitely we must fight back."

He relaxes again, like a man who has convinced his opponent. "Father, I doubt you know about the recent clashes between *our* militia and O.P.C. in Aje-gunle slums."

"I didn't."

"Heavy casualties on both sides.

That's why I'm *escorting* you home," he says, chuckling. "On a more serious note, if O.P.C. thinks Lagos belongs to them alone, we'll see. I hate O.P.C.! Our fearless Egbesu Boys will avenge every drop of Ijaw blood shed in Lagos."

At the mention of the dreaded Egbesu Boys, my palms become sweaty. His accent has deceived me. Now I know he's Ijaw—a rival tribe in the Delta. Once he knows that I'm Itsekiri, God, he may not look kindly on me. We're finished in this country. Two pupils can't fight anymore without the parents introducing the tribal agenda. If someone can't pay her rent, she appeals to her tribal militia. Every tribe in Nigeria is forming a militia. And, within these militias, splinter groups have emerged, making life very complex and dangerous, especially in a place like Lagos, crammed as it is with migrants from all over the country.

I pray that my fate will not be like that of a priest friend of mine who was kidnapped and killed because he attempted to mediate between two tribes. Here in Lagos, my kidnapper just has to pop me in the head and toss my body on the road and laugh his cynical laugh. He doesn't have to do what our youths fighting in the tribal wars back home do: tie the corpses to big stones and sink them in rivers already killed by oil spillage.

I must escape. I'll beg the Lagosian to let me stop and pee. I'll outsmart him. I'll run along the columns of cars and mingle with the restless commuters and disappear into the night. I'll ask for the nearest Catholic parish. My brother can come for his car tomorrow.

The Beetle dies again in another traffic jam. I decide to make my move, and study the surroundings carefully. The shoulderless road is tight, and there are neon signs on some shops and loud music in the air. People stream out of the buses to walk home. A swarm of child hawkers thrust their wares in our faces.

"Uncle, buy democracy flyer!" a little girl calls, waving a bunch of tiny plastic Nigerian flags, her thick multicolored braids gathered up in a ponytail.

"Vitamin C for good health!" a shirtless boy with a clean-shaven head says. He carries sachets of yellow-blue vitamin capsules in a wide white metal tray.

"Rat killer, twenty naira," another boy says. "Holy Bible and Koran, five hundred naira! Rat killer plus Holy Bible plus Koran, four hundred naira!"

"Let us push your car, and you'll pay us whatever you want," they all say in a practiced chorus, coming closer to me. "We've not eaten today!"

I say no—nothing must distract me now. Some roadside mechanics have also surfaced, sitting on their toolboxes, waiting for a car to need them. They're drumming on their boxes with spanners, like beggars rattling their bowls.

Part of the road has been claimed by refuse from a dump, and cars drive around it as if it were a construction site. The refuse rises into a gentle hill and then flattens out in a plateau. There are a few people up there, scavenging still. Their silhouettes look like those of hunchbacks, because of the treasure sacks slung over their backs.

On the other side of the road, there's a long row of shops. A crowded mobile eatery, catering to the needs of traffic-jam victims, flourishes in front of one of them. Customers are sitting on white plastic chairs in a circle, eating *dodo*, and rice and stew, and *amala* and *ewedu*. The chef, sporting stretch jeans, a T-shirt, and a Grace Jones coiffure, is dancing for the crowd. One of her children is washing plates; another is stirring a cauldron over a large fire with a long spoon, as if every customer were Satan. The bass guitar of Awilo Longomba's "Coupe Bibamba" begins to bludgeon the night from two loudspeakers.

The mother stoops in a bowlegged pose, turns her feet outward, and heaves her huge muscular frame toward the toes of her canvas shoes. She sticks out her big buttocks and cocks her head. Then she advances toward the edge of the circle in a *Ndombolo* wobble, scoops the night repeatedly with her groin, then wobbles back. Onlookers clap. As Awilo's voice rustles the night and the lead guitar takes over, the entertainer executes the fake kick and the stagger-and-freeze. The crowd explodes in excitement, spilling over onto the road.

And yet next to this frenzy there are two men hunkered over a low table on the veranda of the shop next door—no shoes, no shirts—playing draughts. A handful of spectators are as transfixed by

the game as the players. One of them has a hunting rifle slung over his shoulder. A couple have sticks. The players are sweating. One is so old and gaunt that the hair on his body is white, and the sweat on his chest hangs like drops of the first rains on dry blades of grass. The younger man is lean, with dreadlocks, and is wearing a necklace of assorted talismans. No drinking, no talking, no movement, except the occasional calculating hands of the two players. The square pieces on the worn-out board have lost their edges to age and usage. Slowly, the younger player picks up a piece and puts it down in another square. Before his hand can retreat, the old man storms through his lines, smacking the board so hard that other pieces jump in fright. The spectators gasp in celebration or sadness, depending on their allegiance. The old man receives his winnings from a neutral spectator, and the loser puts his shirt and shoes back on and disappears in a huff, his fans in tow.

"Father?"

"Ye . . . yes," I stammer, turning to the Egbesu Boy—my unwelcome passenger.

"It's your turn to push the car." He points to a two-car gap that has opened up between us and a white Peugeot wagon in front. It's 21:56. "I'm tired. This city wears you out."

"Of course, it's my turn," I say, my heart leaping, celebrating the chance to escape. "Don't worry, I'll push. You've been an incredible Good Samaritan to me. Just rest."

I love this traffic jam. Lord, may he be tired forever.

I get out and begin to push the car, maneuvering the steering wheel through the window. When I have closed the gap, I remove the keys and smile and tell the Egbesu Boy that I'm going to pee.

He tells me to do it by the roadside, in front of the refuse, but I ignore him and walk across the road, around the dancing mob, and through a gap between two shops. Before me opens up, in the semi-darkness, a field of rubbish and stones and elephant grass. A defunct train track cuts through it, parallel to the road. Suddenly someone rises from the field, startling me. Before I know it, another person heads past me into the field. Then my eyes adjust and I can see many people squatting in the field, defecating, some of them on the old railroad. The

people look like little anthills. I pee hard, emptying my full bladder in the shortest possible time. The sudden loss of pressure gives me a little dull pain in my groin, but my legs are strong again. Also, a strange comfort has descended on me: at least, I'm just peeing, not shitting in the open on a train track.

I turn around and sneak away behind the shops, hurrying in the direction we came from. I can't move as fast as I want because I'm peering at the ground carefully, leaping over this patch of elephant grass, that dark spot on the ground. When you're tired of sitting in my car, I think, you'll find your way home. We'll see how you must "get something out of this trip," Satan!

"Stop there, you shitter!" someone screams.

Two men appear in front of me as I come to the end of the row of shops. One of them is the old draughts player; in the semi-darkness, the tough white hair on his arms looks as if it had been chalked on. They stoop to catch me, their legs and hands spread out like a goalkeeper's.

"Please, what's the problem?" I whisper. I turn, and notice two more men looming behind me. When they get closer, I see their native hunting rifles and sticks. One of them tries to charm me by touching me with a talisman, a snake head.

I know I have been captured by O.P.C. members.

"We be vigilante for dis part of Lagos," the old man says. "Why you shit for train track?"

"No, I didn't defecate."

"You no suppose shit for train track!" the snake-head man shouts at me. "You must pay for all de shit for de field!"

"Please, I did not shit. We Itsekiris have a strong culture of hygiene—like the Yorubas." I look them in the eye with the hope that my appeal to tribe will save me.



"O.K., Mr. Itsekiri Hygiene, we go carry you go crime scene to take evidence," the third person says. "We no care about your tribe!"

"You go use your hand carry your *igbe* to our headquarters," the fourth adds. "How dare you shit on Yorubaland!"

"But look at these other people," I say. The men start shoving me and poking me with their sticks. The talisman fellow keeps hitting my knees with the snake head. Then the other two men haul me off my feet toward the tracks, far away from where I urinated. Seeing that they're determined to hang someone's shit around my neck, as it were, I manage to hand some money to the old man.

"Let me handle this fake Reverend Father Red Beetle, O.K.," he says to his people, who drop me. I'm shocked that he already knows my identity. Now I know that they must be working hand in hand with the Lagosian. But didn't my passenger say he hated O.P.C., that his militia of choice was Egbesu Boys? All the same, I'm relieved that my money has stopped them from sticking my hand in someone else's shit. "He doesn't understand our English," the old man says. "He's a V.I.P. criminal. Let me handle him."

"Sorry, *egbon!*" The snake-head man apologizes and salutes him.

"Carry on, Commander!" the other men say in agreement.

"Know that anything you say can be used against you at our headquarters," the old man says to me. "Did you vote for Abiola, our Yoruba President that never was? The Yoruba man who was admired all over the country, but whose election was cancelled by General Babangida?"

"I voted, Commander!"

"Good. You're a friend of O.P.C., then. Nothing to fear!"

I hear people running toward us. Three grim faces pop up around us; I immediately recognize the young dreadlocked draughts player.

"Don't argue with the rich shitter!" he shouts at the old man. "Just seize his wallet!"

"No talk to Commander like dat o!" one of the men warns him. "Learn to be a democrat. Democracy *dey* come."

"He's too old to handle these things," the dreadlocked man says, taking off his necklace of talismans. He moves

menacingly toward me, trying to put it around my neck, to hypnotize me. But Commander and his lieutenants block him and his men. For a while, they circle each other, like two packs of hyenas angling for the same carcass—mine—until the dreadlocked player and his followers leave, as abruptly as they arrived, in search of better prey.

“You’re shivering like a coward!” Commander admonishes me. **“They’re gone. Be a man! Anyway, as they say, a coward is a chicken: peeing and shitting are the same thing.”**

“I only urinated, but not on the track,” I say, balling my fists to check the tremble. **“I promise never to pee in public again.”**

Commander chuckles. **“Good, you’re now admitting guilt.”**

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

“But, see, one little thing. The bribe you gave me a few minutes ago will be used as evidence against you at our headquarters, unless—” He stops and wrings his hands, as if he were trying to wash the white hairs from his skin. **“Unless you buy back the bribe. It’s called ‘bribe servicing,’ as in ‘debt servicing,’ Itsekiri or not, you must service the bribe!”**

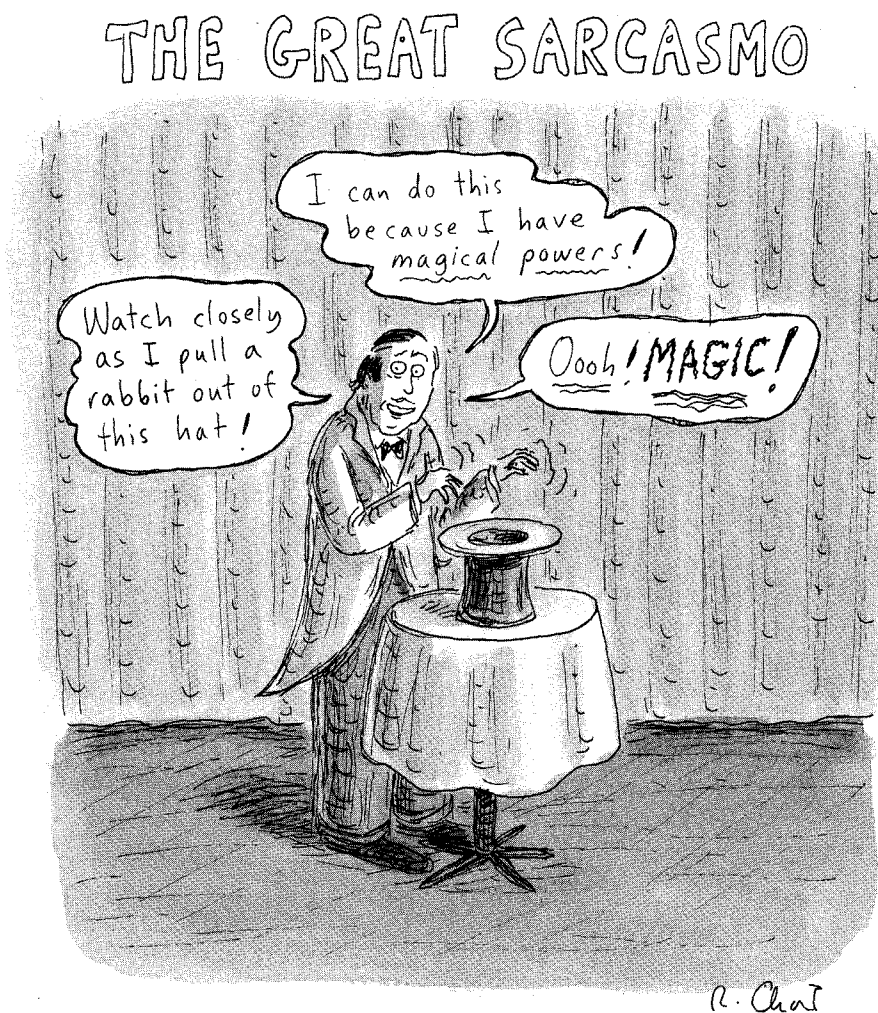
I give him another five hundred naira, hoping that he’ll release me. But after putting the money in his pocket he says to me, **“And, by the way, why abandon your car in a traffic jam? Don’t you have jams where you come from?”**

“I didn’t want to be killed for Pirelli tires,” I start to say.

“It’s O.K., I’m here, I’m here, please o!” It’s the Lagosian’s merry voice. He runs to us and shakes hands with the O.P.C. folks but avoids my eyes. **“Thanks for finding him for me. We’re disrupting traffic; we must go back immediately.”**

“O.P.C. is more efficient than Nigerian police!” Commander says. **“I promised you we’d find him.”**

It’s 22:34, and in my absence the jam has become worse. Many cars have overtaken us, driving around my Beetle as if it were a huge pothole. I try the ignition and the car re-starts, though I have to keep revving to sustain it. The darker the night the more aggressive the child hawkers become, but they ignore me, as if a man who abandons his car in traffic were a pariah.



The Lagosian keeps mumbling that he has to get more out of the trip than the forty naira he just paid the old O.P.C. man to find me. But nothing matters to me anymore. If he asks me why I ran away, I won’t say a thing. Let him kill me, auction off or sacrifice my essential organs, and crush my corpse under cars, I think. How different is my corpse, anyway, from the one I drove over or the hundreds I periodically bury back home or the ones weighted with stones in the black Delta rivers? All these deaths, day in, day out. Why bother? Why even bother to bring together the tribes in my parish? Why bother raising funds for the displaced and the wounded? This is a horrible trip.

My car dies again, in spite of my revs, at a roundabout. Half a mile down the road, there’s a petrol station. Cars are lined up in pairs, bumper to bumper, coated with a week-old layer of dust. Drivers lounge around, with no idea when fuel will come. The

queue has formed a tightening noose around the roundabout, reducing three lanes of traffic to the one that contains my dead Beetle. The Lagosian arranges for some of the child hawkers to push it as the traffic inches along; it doesn’t worry me anymore to pay them to do this.

“Father, I’m killing a goat to usher in this democracy!” the Lagosian says excitedly. **“God won’t let any number of ritual butts curse us with another military government!”**

“Really.”

I wish they were sacrificing your butt! How do I get you to shut your trap and leave me to my thoughts? You’re denouncing the military, yet you’re kidnapping me for my Pirellis and a roll of new naira bills. I wish you dead.

“Our pumps are dry! The generals have blocked the refinery so that they can import fuel to make money!” He’s tapping the dashboard again. His chortle bottoms out into a relentless guffaw. **“I get so mad I want to carry a big, big**

gun and pop soldiers. Sometimes, I just laugh. Father, man, I just laugh. Well, God is helping us survive these military thieves. What do you think?"

"Me?"

"Yeah. Are you really close to God, man?"

"Yes."

"Well, good for you, man, good for you. Nobody believes in anything in this damn country. God this, God that. Yet the place is hell, you know."

"I'm in hell in this car."

He glances sideways at me. "Are you O.K., man?"

"Well, does it matter? Stop questioning me. Just leave me alone. What the hell do you believe in?"

He leaves his eyes on me but continues to laugh cynically. "Oh, come on, don't let this military kleptomania get to you, my friend! As I was saying, I mean, what's four billion dollars compared to the twelve and a half billion they say we lost under General Babangida in the eighties? This is the only country I know where people who pinch five naira are burned, while those who steal billions of dollars are revered! When these generals go, we must sit together and figure out what kind of country we want to bequeath our kids, man."

"Look, I don't really care."

Being Nigerian means nothing to me now. I just want to be free of you. I wish you dead, dead, dead. If I hadn't met you, I would be home by now. You coldhearted bastard who connived with O.P.C. bullies and robbed me at shit point. If you had access to billions of dollars, you would connive with the Swiss banks and stash it away. You're Commander and Babangida and Abacha combined.

Now a motorcycle, with three passengers atop, begins to make its way like a giant spider through the tiny space between my car and an articulated lorry. The motorcycle, fitted with a radio, is screeching gospel music. "Pull in your side mirror so dat my Mercedes-Benz can pass, *o jare!*" the motorcyclist commands. I ask him to be patient, tell him that there's no space yet. He starts calling me names in a language I don't understand, leaving his finger permanently on his horn. He spits on my windscreen, but it still doesn't worry me. My companion asks

the boy selling Vitamin C, who is helping to move my car, to push in the side mirror. The spider staggers ahead, with all three passengers dragging their legs to stabilize it.

The children are singing and pushing, their lilting voices competing with the loudspeakers. They get the car into a side street, and the Lagosian pays them off.

"But on top of all this," the Lagosian says, "General Abacha and his friends still *grabbed*, as the Kenyans would say, tons of government fertilizer! Why hoard government fertilizer for your friends?" He's not laughing anymore, and the contempt in his voice almost overturns my guarded hatred of him. "As our people say, 'How can a man who has killed an elephant and carries the meat on his head be distracted by a roasted cricket?' That man has disgraced us!"

"Really."

My life, my tires, my money. Which one is elephant meat or roasted cricket to you?

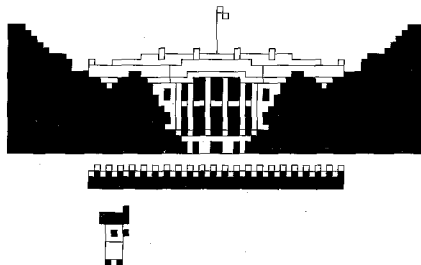
In the dark, his thievish eyes glow with unshed 419 tears. He sits there, as gloomy as if his business empire had just lost billions to swindlers. Then his husky voice climbs six bars to an angry rant that sounds almost convincing: "I'd go nowhere near someone's fertilizer! How did we come by this sort of decay?"

"Decay?"

He excuses himself and gets out of the car.

When I look in the rearview mirror, he's behind the car, chatting with a mechanic he's found, one hand in his pocket, holding the gun. This tightens the cloth around his groin and jacks up the leg of the trousers. The mechanic is a tall wiry man with a youthful face and a ready smile. He's carrying two spanners and a piece of wire.

I join them. The mechanic is anxious to begin work and is telling the Lagosian that he can fix anything, and that



he offers the cheapest service around. Two of the hawkers, the ponytailed girl and the shirtless boy, come closer, hand in hand.

"Please, sir, hire Daddy," the boy says. "He won't disappoint you!"

"We need to eat tonight!" the girl adds. "Jesus will bless you, sir."

"God shall elect you the new President of our country!" the boy says.

"Shut up!" the Lagosian commands, hushing them. "Get out of here, little manipulators!"

Then he turns to me and asks whether we should hire the mechanic. I shrug to show my indifference: who knows what sinister plans he has already made with him.

I get inside the car, and the two men and the children push it back to the main road. It's 23:37. My companion's white shirt is dirtied by sweat and by the dust whipped up by *molues*. Even his tie is soaked with sweat.

The electricity goes out, the city dissolving into a noisy darkness. He hands the mechanic a tiny torch that he pulls from a pocket. It's 23:58. Hawkers are still selling, their lanterns illuminating the streets like a stalled candlelight procession. *Molues* are still moving.

Nearby, the Commodore Jesus Ministries has begun a "Democracy Victory Vigil" in a packed compound. Over powerful loudspeakers, the congregants sing and scream and bomb out demons. The pastor is telling them that witches are responsible for our national woes, that only well-placed spiritual explosives can help. He says those who are waiting to obtain their rights from the new government have pagan thoughts, that God's people thrive not on human rights but on spiritual vows to Heaven's dictator. He warns that America and Europe are the new Babylons because they believe in every religion, when the Bible clearly says that God wants Pentecostal Christianity alone.

The Lagosian keeps laughing at the church's name, saying that the military has stained everything in our culture. He says that the pastor is a lunatic who doesn't understand democracy.

"Are you calling my pastor a madman?" the mechanic says, stopping his work. "It's not funny at all!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," the Lagosian says.

"What's democracy?" the mechanic

continues, still offended, banging his two spanners together. "Is it more difficult than the miracles our pastor has wrought, huh?"

"Bullshit. You guys must come out and vote!" The Lagosian seems angry now that the mechanic hasn't accepted his apology.

"Show me democracy in the Bible! Look, we're spiritual commodores! Our pastor has set up spiritual polling stations."

"Then quit messing around with my car and join the fucking vigil."

"No, I need the money bad," the mechanic says, his face relaxing again into a smile.

But the Lagosian is upset. "An asshole like you does no one any good. Don't touch my car again!"

I can tell that he wants to pull out the gun, but looking at the children he changes his mind. The kids are tired, sitting by the side of the road, giggling and playing with pebbles. I wink at the mechanic, warning him not to provoke the Lagosian again. But he can't see my eyes in the night. With all the noise around, who would even hear a gunshot? God, it would be better for me to die than this poor mechanic. Have mercy, for the sake of these children.

The mechanic continues, "If your two wives gave you five children in five years, you'd understand how tough life is."

"You should be castrated!" the Lagosian says.

"My first job in two days. If God hadn't given me children to sell goods in traffic, my family would have starved."

"Child abuse," he says.

"Child abuse?" the mechanic says, laughing. "My children have just helped you push your car. Weren't you happy with that? If they hadn't brought me to you tonight, what would you have done? For their sake, don't be angry with me."

My companion doesn't speak anymore. He bends over, returning his attention to the engine of the car. And suddenly, as if hit by a new idea, he says, "By the way, mechanic, have you checked the coil?"

The problem is the coil—it's overheated, and the mechanic buys three small plastic bags of water from a roadside stall. But there's no container to soak the coil in.

The Lagosian sighs and thrusts his hand firmly—Oh, Christ!—into his gun pocket.

My legs become numb.

"Are you O.K.?" the mechanic asks, catching me as I stumble. The children come and hold me, too.

"Daddy, he's shaking," the boy says.

"Daddy, he has malaria," the girl whispers, and then she begins crying, feeling my forehead with the back of her hand.

My kidnapper pulls out a handkerchief the size of a hand towel—and his gun pocket goes flat. It's empty.

"I hope you're not ashamed of the size of my hanky," he says, apologizing. "I sweat a lot." Then he rushes to my side and, together with the mechanic and his family, leads me over to sit on the Beetle's mudguard.

My embarrassment is boundless as I watch the mechanic soak the "gun" and wrap it around the coil. The boy suggests that I need some vitamins, which he can give me at a discount.

"So, what do you do, sir?" I finally ask the Lagosian.

"I have a company that imports iron rod, back where I found you. I used to travel abroad a lot, but now business is slow. Hey, at last you're relaxed, Father." He smiles and nudges my ribs. "You must be Itsekiri, yes?"

"I am, sir."

"I had to stop talking about Egbesu Boys once I noticed you were uncomfortable."

My eyes are teary with shame and gratitude as I pay the mechanic.

"I just don't know how to thank you, sir," I say to the Lagosian.

"Oh no, thank you, Father, man, for allowing me to dump all my frustrations at this country of ours on you," he says, laughing again, his teeth glowing. "You know, we need to start trusting each other. I'm tired of blaming it all on our leaders—we've become a difficult lot to help. I was praying hard that I'd connect with you somehow."

I reach into my back pocket to show him my watch. I hold it with two hands, an offering to a god of guilt, before putting it back on.

As my passenger fades into the night, his laugh is my absolution. ♦

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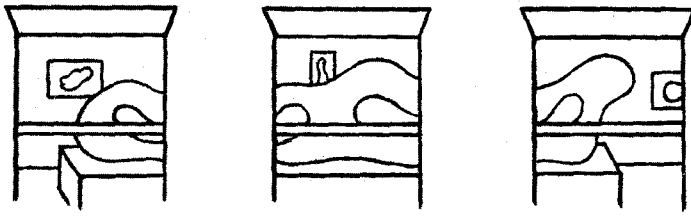
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BOOKS

HOLLYWOOD ROYALTY

Two sides of Grace Kelly.

BY ANTHONY LANE

One spring day in 1952, Miss Grace Kelly, of Philadelphia, now resident in New York, went across to "a barn-like studio on the far West Side of Manhattan." That is how she later described it, as if recalling a foreign trip. In the barn, she did a screen test, for a movie called "Taxi," opposite Robert Alda: the fair young maid and the darker, troubled fellow, each pleading with the other. Kelly wears a soft sweater and, beneath it, a white blouse, whose demure collar is just discernible. We can also make out a mild Irish accent—not much of a stretch, for one of the Kelly clan. "It ain't that I'm not fond of you," she says, in words that have weighed like lead, throughout history, on the hearts of disappointed guys. Her eyes keep moving across the man, as if he were a passage of verse. There is both hesitancy and force in this woman; you can picture her, faced with a decision, flitting back and forth, and yet, once decided, becoming quite fiery and sure. It was a combination that appealed to the director of "Taxi," Gregory Ratoff. He liked the look of Kelly, all the more so because, in his view, the look was that of a plain Jane. According to Kelly, "I was in the 'too' category for a very long time. I was too tall, too leggy, too chinny. I remember that Mr. Ratoff kept yelling, 'She's perfect! What I love about this girl is that she's *not pretty!*'"

Few movie directors have been certifiably blind, and on the strength of

this oversight Ratoff tops the list with ease, but, to his credit—and to Kelly's relief—he was ready to rave about this creature for reasons other than her looks. Ratoff's bosses at Twentieth Century Fox didn't share his eagerness, and she failed to get the part, but his fellow-directors knew better. Donald Spoto, the author of a new biography, "High Society: The Life of Grace Kelly" (Harmony; \$25.99), seems to place her screen test in 1950, but I watched it recently, and there, in the corner of the frame, is the date "May 26 1952." In short, it was only a matter of months before Kelly came to the attention of John Ford, at M-G-M. (Spoto's remark on such practice—"it was common for studios to exchange screen tests made by actors they subsequently rejected"—has the right ring of pitiless mercantile behavior. You take my leavings, I'll have yours.) Ford warmed to what he saw—"This dame has breeding, quality, class," he said, adding, "I'll bet she'll knock us on our ass!"—and, come November, the dame was in Africa, shooting "Mogambo" and knocking Clark Gable on his ass. That may have rattled a bit, because he had false teeth.

And still "Taxi" sped on. In the summer of 1953, Kelly was summoned to the presence of Alfred Hitchcock, who wanted to inspect her for a leading role in "Dial M for Murder." He had not yet seen "Mogambo"; he was not even certain, he once told Spoto, that he had

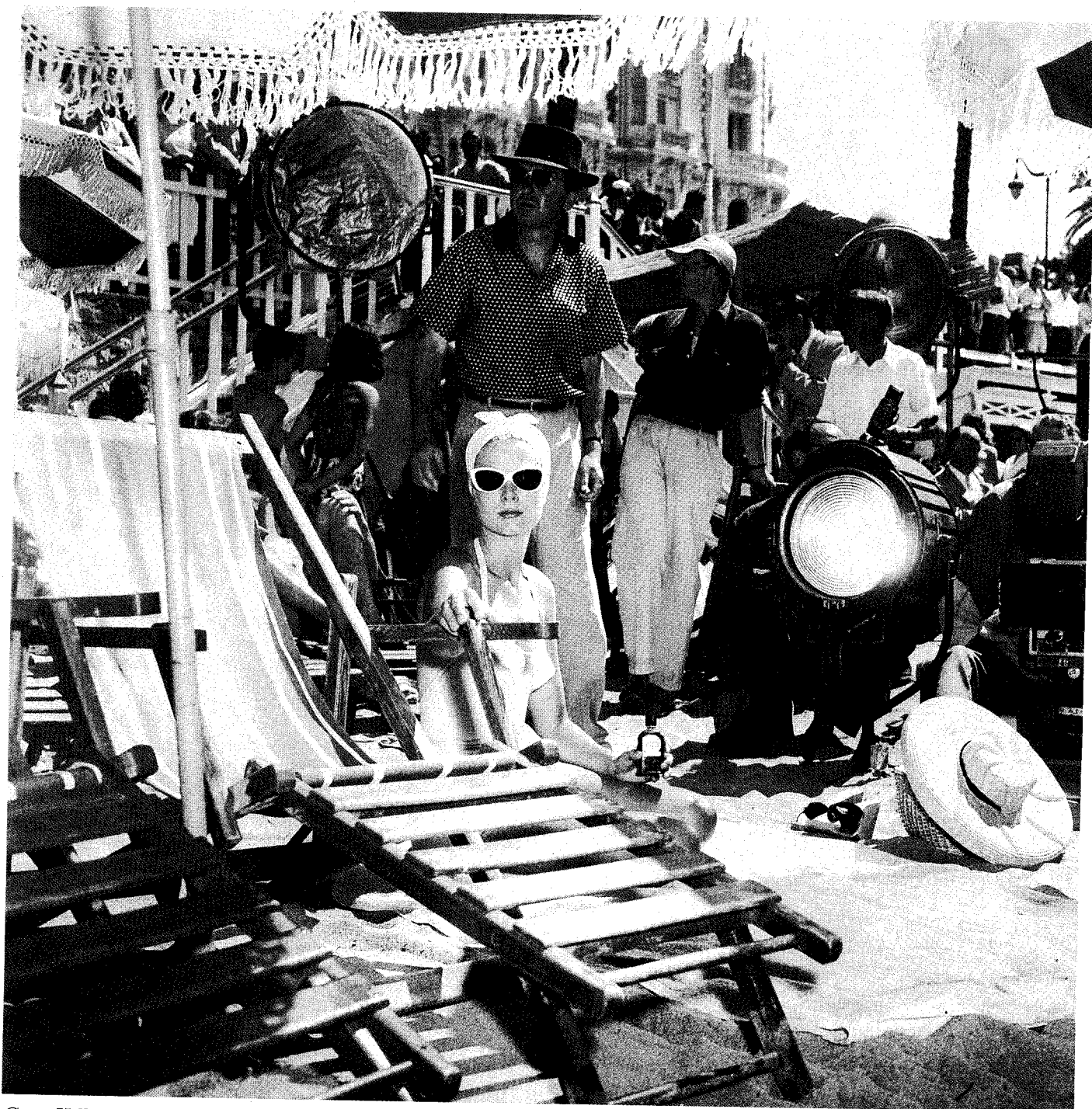
seen "High Noon," which had been released a year before, and in which Kelly played Gary Cooper's Quaker wife. But he had seen her in the "Taxi" test, and that was sufficient; to those fleeting minutes, therefore, we owe not only "Dial M for Murder" but "Rear Window," one of the monuments of the medium, and "To Catch a Thief," one of its blithest feats of seduction.

Mathematically, Kelly presents an unusual case. She made only eleven feature films, in a career that lasted just five years, from 1951 to 1956. Of those eleven, six are treasured—five and a half, maybe, depending on how you feel about "Mogambo," with its amusing study of the way baby elephants behave in proximity to mud. Of the remaining movies, "Green Fire" is a certified stinker, while "The Country Girl"—for which Kelly won an Oscar—is drab and overwrought. Kelly appears in "The Bridges at Toko-Ri," despite her lofty billing, for about fifteen minutes, and in "Fourteen Hours" for a fraction of that. As for "The Swan," her penultimate film, it was a smash in its day but has faded into a delicate curiosity, like a watercolor on a sunny wall. Yet the patina of Kelly herself—the gloss of her name and fame, the freshness and directness of her look—has, if anything, acquired a richer lustre. Accounts of her *modus vivendi* never cease to accrue, yet the more we know the less we seem to grasp. Starlight can be quantified—1954 was "this year of Grace," according to *Life*—but its effect on maddened mortals below is all but impossible to gauge. The Kelly effect is not unlike the James Dean effect (three great films, three bit parts), whereby a few brief hours of screen time continue unquenchably to burn.

Grace was the third child of John B. Kelly, and far from his favorite. He was a strapping, outdoors figure, who grew rich in the construction business, and won three Olympic gold medals for rowing; Franklin D. Roosevelt made him National Physical Fitness Director. He pushed his only son, John, Jr., in similar directions. Grace was soft and sickly as a child, "always sniffing," she recalled, and her father preferred her

Kelly in 1955, in the gown she wore when she won the Oscar for best actress. Photograph by Philippe Halsman.





Grace Kelly on the set of "To Catch a Thief," in 1954. The Kelly effect is not unlike the James Dean effect, whereby a few brief hours

elder sister, Margaret (known as Peggy), for whom he predicted great things. "I thought it would be Peggy whose name would be up in lights one day. Anything that Grace could do, Peggy could do better," he told *McCall's* in January, 1955, shortly before the disappointing daughter got her Academy Award. Peggy and John, Jr., for their part, grew up to lead problematic lives, dampened by drink.

A home movie exists of the children at play, on a beach—perhaps at the family vacation home in Ocean City,

New Jersey. The children, in bathing costumes, are still small, and each is summoned forth to face the camera and salute, as if being a Kelly were a form of active service. When in Rome, you can see the movie for yourself; just wander down the Via del Corso and duck into the Fondazione Memmo, where an exhibition entitled "Gli Anni di Grace Kelly, Principessa di Monaco" is showing till the end of February. There is much to dote upon, beginning with a birth certificate, dated November 12, 1929. There are film clips, posters,

magazine covers, dresses, jewels, a giant Hermès Kelly handbag, and a room devoted to the day, in 1956, when Kelly married Prince Rainier and became Princess Grace. There are letters from a range of acquaintances, including George Balanchine, Jacqueline Onassis, and Greta Garbo, who admits to being "upside-downy" and confides, as one deity to another, that "I have not been around much with human beings lately." No, indeed. The deal that Kelly struck with herself is, in some ways, even stranger than Garbo's withdrawal from

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reen time continue unquenchably to burn.

the world. The younger woman's kernel of privacy was no less keenly guarded, yet she chose to live and marry in the public glare, as if daring herself to bury any frailties beneath the sheen of self-possession. Even when wretched, she would be right-side-uppy.

The most touching object in the show is the scrapbook compiled by the teen-age Grace. A paper napkin, a Christmas-tree decoration, a Schaefer beer mat, a bookmark with lines from Emily Dickinson, a red matchbook, a ticket for a charity golf match, and the

wrapper from a pack of Wrigley's Doublemint, its cheerful greenness still bright. Joseph Cornell would have taken one look and wept. There are notes, inscribed in ink by the owner: "This is where Harper got me the silver compact he gave me for Valentine's," "Daddy bought this for me at the Penn Cornell game," and, beside a torn blue ticket stub for the Locust Street Theatre, in Philadelphia, the words "Dec. 9th '43. Our class went in to see 'Kiss + Tell.'"

The stage bug, unencouraged by her parents, was starting to bite, and, with barely a jump, Kelly went from collecting playbills to appearing on them. In 1947, before enrolling at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, which charged a cool five hundred dollars a year, she moved to New York, where she resided, as nice young ladies did, at the Barbizon Hotel for Women, at Lexington and Sixty-third Street, and had an affair with an actor and director eleven years her senior, as nice young ladies didn't. What is more, he was married, though separated, and Jewish; "The fact that I could fall in love with a Jew was beyond them," Kelly said of her parents, in a letter to a friend. For the next two years, she alternated between theatrical training and professional modelling, including spots on TV commercials. The first of these, for insecticide, required the future Princess to run about, "smiling like an idiot and spraying like a demon," as she put it, but, sadly, no whiff of it lingers. Shortly after graduation, in 1949, she won roles at the Bucks County Playhouse, in New Hope, Pennsylvania, and Donald Spoto, helpfully, reprints a program note. It is a masterpiece of belittlement:

She is the daughter of John B. Kelly, of Philadelphia. Her brother recently figured in the news by winning the Diamond Sculls at the Henley Regatta in England. Her father was a champion oarsman and is well known as the former chairman of the Democratic Party in Philadelphia.

Reading this, you can't help marking out the time line of Kelly's liberation. What she did was escape from one starchy, disapproving, tradition-tight environment, become her own woman for eight or nine years, and then dive head first into another, as if her conscience had caught up with her. If, for the term of her fame, she was able to enslave the attention of all who knew her,

as well as the millions who didn't, it may be because she was forced—or forced herself—to pack a lifetime of freedom into the briefest span. She sometimes comes across as the last of the Jamesians, slipping the bonds of the New World, "affronting her destiny," as James says of Isabel Archer, yet winding up before long in a parody of the Old—in a miniature state, antiquated and fussy, where she could live in limitless style but never at ease. (It is reported that, as a gesture of good will on the occasion of her marriage, Monaco's only prisoner was released.) Every woman who came to visit her, Princess Grace learned, was obliged to wear a hat.

According to Spoto's calculations, Kelly, having been noticed by scouts, performed in no fewer than thirty-five live television dramas between 1950 and 1954. (Who wouldn't wish to have seen her as Dulcinea to Boris Karloff's Don Quixote?) Amid these, she did indeed play a character from Henry James, a nineteenth-century enchantress from his late, time-travelling novel "The Sense of the Past." Onstage, two years before, she had played Marian Almond in an adaptation of "Washington Square." Marian is described by James as "a pretty little person of seventeen, with a very small figure and a very big sash, to the elegance of whose manners matrimony had nothing to add," and what is extraordinary, in retrospect, is the number of Kelly projects that arrowed in on marriage—on the loom and the lure of it, on the sacrifices that might be incurred, on the dreams of flight that it could not help but promote. Her first appearance on the big screen, in "Fourteen Hours," already fits the bill; in fur coat, veil, and pearls, she is helped through a gridlock of cars, in a hurry to get to the lawyers' office, where her divorce will be finalized. In the end, she decides to halt the proceedings and give love another go. Next came "High Noon," which begins with Kelly as a newlywed, worried—and no wonder, when you see the varmints whom her husband must confront—that she is set to become an instant widow. Then we get "Mogambo," in which Kelly must tamp down her attraction to a hunter and safari guide (Clark Gable) in favor of a stolid husband; "The Country Girl," in which her marriage is imperilled by drink; "The Bridges at



"If we don't decide what we're worth, who will?"

Toko-Ri," in which she sees her husband off to war and death; "Rear Window," where her dearest wish is to win Jimmy Stewart; and "To Catch a Thief," in which she is pretty much pimped by her own mama.

And so to "The Swan," where we find Kelly's Princess Alexandra, a noblewoman in a sunlit European land, in the lull before the First World War, torn between a royal tutor (Louis Jourdan), glossy and flame-hearted, and the dry, balding prince (Alec Guinness) for whom she is intended. "Your whole life, your whole upbringing, has been devoted to just one thing: to make you fit to be a queen," Alexandra's mother tells her. Temptations are resisted; duty calls, and the happy couple—or, at least, the correct couple—get hitched. "The Swan" wrapped in December, 1955. On December 28th, Prince Rainier proposed to Kelly, and what one longs to know is: Had she planned what kind of groom she would snare in the end, and, perhaps unconsciously, angled her choice of movies in that direction, or did the matchmaking simply prove—to a world thirsty for illusion, only a decade after the Second World War—that movies could still come true?

To that last question, "High Society," which was filmed during Kelly's engagement, is a tarter response than its

reputation might suggest, with Kelly, playing the ex-wife of Bing Crosby, veering back toward him on the eve of her second marriage. (And enjoying a bracing dip with Frank Sinatra along the way.) It is customary to denigrate "High Society" by comparing it with its parent, "The Philadelphia Story," but I knew the child first, when I was a child, too, and nothing can undo the movies that we are led to in our youth, or the skein of impressions that they leave. I remember my mother explaining to me, drawing on who knows what store of apocrypha, that Prince Rainier had watched the scene of his wife-to-be, droopy with drink, being lugged through the moonlight in Sinatra's arms, both of them in towelling robes, and that His Serene Highness had bridled at the outrage and declared that her works be outlawed, henceforth and on pain of death, within the bounds of his kingdom. This struck me as precisely how a jealous monarch should behave, and the twin sense of Kelly as both sovereign and subversive was planted in my brain. I was told how remarkable it was that Kelly had deigned to sing, and therefore how natural it was that her yacht-borne duet with Crosby, "True Love," should have sold a million copies on record. She fondles the end of his squeezebox as they harmonize, but that, I suspect, went over my head, as

did their bizarre exchange beside the swimming pool:

"Gee, I didn't know that you wanted a husband who would be kind of a high priest to a virgin goddess."

"Oh, stop using those foul words."

Best of all, my mother pointed out that when Crosby sang "I Love You, Samantha" he did everything—folded his handkerchief, tied his bow tie, wound his wristwatch, filled his cigarette case, and donned his tuxedo, crooning all the while—without a cut. I had never heard of a cut before, or a take. (And, if there is any actor alive today who could reach that extreme pitch of relaxation, I've yet to see him.) When the cut finally comes, it is to Kelly, listening at the window of her bedroom. She walks away, overwhelmed; we follow her, then pause, and pull politely back, as she turns and stands there, sheathed in her Oriental robe of yellow-gold. Downstairs, Louis Armstrong laughs and says, "Now we're gettin' warm."

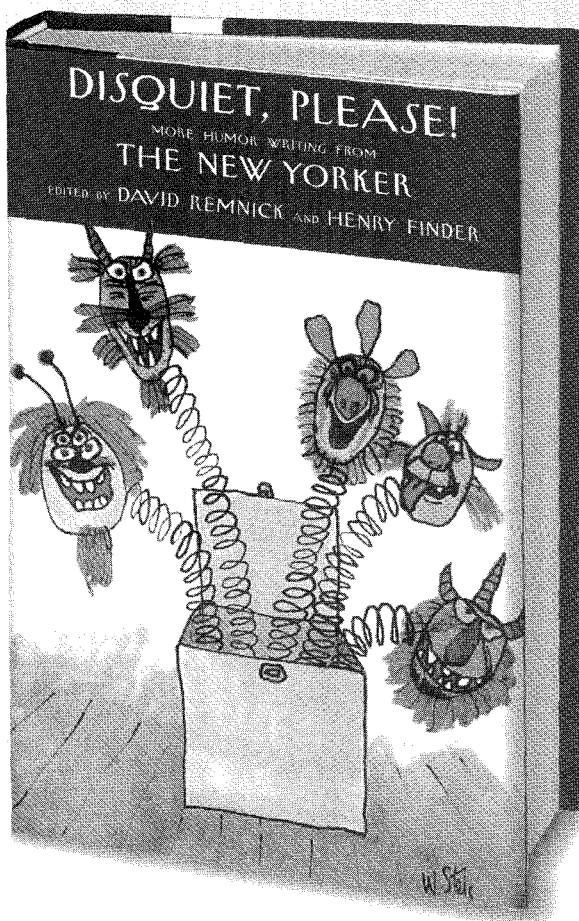
The sex life of Grace Kelly, like the home life of the Incas, is one of those distant but down-to-earth matters which we can investigate in depth, and muse upon at length, but never really hope to understand. According to some observers, she herself may not have grasped its implications; in the words of a columnist at *Photoplay*, "I wonder if Grace Kelly knew she had so much S.A." To which the only proper response is, W.T.F.?

Donald Spoto, in his new book, takes the unfashionable decision to deny anything that smacks of rampancy. That distinct clatter you can hear, as you turn the pages, is the sound of skeletons being crammed back into the closet. Here are some of the people with whom Kelly, contrary to what you may have heard, did *not* have an affair: the star and the director, respectively, of "High Noon," Cooper and Fred Zinnemann ("not a shred of evidence to support either rumor," Spoto writes), Ray Milland ("no one connected to 'Dial M for Murder' was aware of or spoke about any intrigue"), Bing Crosby, and, most impressive of all, Clark Gable, on "Mogambo." Spoto puts us straight on that one right away: "A strong attraction is not invariably expressed sexually, no matter how randy

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ON SALE NOW IN HARDCOVER

he have a wonderful photo-
Hitchcock giving tea to his
of "To Catch a Thief."
f course, from a bone-
erved in a cup and saucer,
spoon. Kelly is seated in
hair, outside on the grass,
an English picnic, and the
ense looks like a rubicund
ntry house. James Cam-
ve done the same for
ver on the set of "Aliens,"

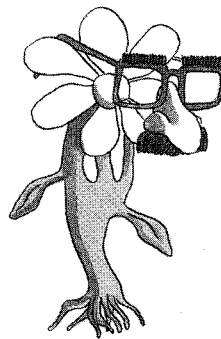
is the figure who wraps
pposing views of Grace
s them into a single mys-
and relished all the rud-
d never have been so vul-
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with Kelly. One quick
uffice. He was the first
en closely to the gentle
well-bred speaking voice
laced," according to the
demy of Dramatic Arts),
the wicked elongation of
n now, don't say you can't
-clad Grace tells Ray
al M for Murder," low-
syllable into a two-toned
heating on him, and her

lover is in the room.) During a famous
exchange with François Truffaut,
Hitchcock argued that "if sex is too bla-
tant or obvious, there's no suspense.
You know why I favor sophisticated
blondes in my films? We're after the
drawing-room type, the real ladies, who
become whores once they're in the bed-
room." He then referred to the scene in
"To Catch a Thief" where John Robie
(Cary Grant), a former cat burglar, joins
Frances (Kelly), an heiress, and her
mother for drinks at a Riviera hotel. "I
deliberately photographed Grace Kelly
ice-cold and I kept cutting to her profile,
looking classical, beautiful, and very dis-
tant. And then, when Cary Grant ac-
companies her to the door of her hotel
room, what does she do? She thrusts her
lips right up to his mouth."

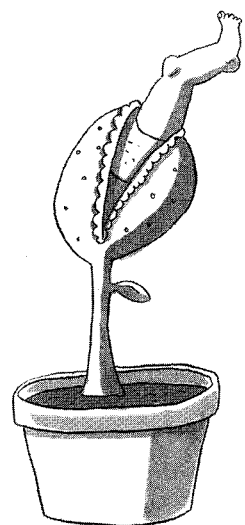
The auteur is aroused, perhaps, by
his own art, and with good cause.
"Thrusts" is too meaty a word for what
Kelly does; she just homes in, friction-
less and unquestioning, as if *not* to kiss
Cary Grant would have been an insult
to nature, and the giveaway is less in her
devilish shadow of a smile than in the
arm that she drapes around his neck,
fingers faintly kneading, to pull him
close. Oh, and that look on his face as
she closes the door: modest, enter-

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Venus Baby Trap

Kanin

tained, surprised, but not too surprised—confessing to himself that, yes, in the best of all possible worlds (which is where Hitchcock, for a minute or more, has landed us), this is just the kind of thing that ought to happen.

“Grace” reads the heading of Section XXII, in the third part of “A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,” published in 1757. The author, Edmund Burke, elaborates: “Gracefulness is an idea belonging to *posture* and *motion*. In both these, to be graceful, it is requisite that there be no appearance of difficulty; there is required a small inflexion of the body,” whose various parts, he says elsewhere, should be “not angular, but melted as it were into each other.” Burke was in his twenties when he wrote this, and you can tell. You also wish that he could have hopped a couple of centuries and witnessed Grace in action: the small inflexion of her body, say, as she strolls around a low-lit room, in “Rear Window,” turning on lamps, with James Stewart watching, wry and enraptured, from his wheelchair. “By beauty,” Burke says, “I mean, that quality or those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it.”

That is what Kelly did: she caused love. No gift is more priceless, and you probably have to be born with it, but, like all jewels, it can use a cut and polish, and it took a while for Kelly—not to mention her lovers, and her better directors—to make the most of her facets. The glitter is not yet at full power in “Mogambo,” although John Ford did snatch a few shots of her panting at Gable, with a storm in the air and sweat in the hollow of her throat. Nonetheless, when Ava Gardner, wearing a conical bra that could put out the eyes of a hippo, says to her, “Oh, men can get you into all sorts of trouble, can’t they?” Kelly just sips her tea in some confusion. Ford had the two most beautiful women in the world in one frame, but the clash was not yet between equals, because Kelly was still being presented as the little woman. If she grew taller by the end of the shoot, it’s partly because of what happened offscreen, not least when Gardner, who had become a pal, took her on furlough to Rome. There, according to Lee Server, Gardner’s bi-

ographer, they toured the city’s brothels after dark. Women can get themselves into all sorts of trouble.

Hollywood has, as often as not, been thrown and baffled by its most unearthly beauties; Gene Tierney, Linda Darnell, and Hedy Lamarr boast no more than a pocketful of strong films among them. How did Kelly manage? Well, it may have helped to have grown up in a Philadelphia mansion with seventeen rooms and a chauffeur. It certainly helped that she was not so consumed by desperation for stardom that she would do anything, and buckle under any instruction, to reach it; “the idea of being owned by a studio was offensive to me,” she said. The Kelly who emerges from Spoto’s book is more headstrong, during her years of self-rule, than you might expect; first in her contractual duels, and then in the control of her own image. In 1955, the two strands entwined, as, with an Oscar nomination under her belt, and with the heads of M-G-M snarling and suspending her for turning down roles that they thought she should be grateful for (including that of the ailing Elizabeth Barrett Browning), she took herself and her sister Peggy off to Jamaica, where she arranged to be photographed by Howell Conant. Those who bought *Collier’s* magazine on June 24th, and checked the cover, knew that they had run into something hot, and that Kelly knew it, too—posing in a pool and staring at the lens, with the water up to her bare shoulders. What went on below the surface, or what had come off, was ours to guess. This is not the action of a cold fish.

In the meantime, she had won her Oscar, notionally for “The Country Girl,” maybe the only movie in which she got to don the spectacles that she wore in regular life. (That misty, far-away look that she gave to Cary Grant? She really was faraway, from her myopic perspective, and it really was a mist.) But the award was for a stretch of hard labor, which had yielded five films in a year; in the words of Bob Hope, the master of ceremonies, “I just wanna say they should give a special award for bravery to the producer who produced a movie without Grace Kelly.” When she won, she turned to Don Hartman, the Paramount executive sitting next to her, and said, “Are you sure? Are you

sure?” No less incredulous was her father, watching on TV. “I simply can’t believe Grace won,” he said, still missing the point. The footage shows her gliding down to the stage in her pale sea-blue gown, as if on casters, tiny handbag hung from the crook of her arm: posture and motion, as Edmund Burke would say.

Highlights of the Kelly wardrobe are now on display in Rome. They include some of her most famous outfits, if you know the movies, yet without her inflection they are dead shells; in the Kelly universe, the soul needs the body as the body needs Edith Head, who dressed her for “Rear Window” and “To Catch a Thief.” They also demonstrate, beyond doubt, that nothing about Kelly was more stylish than her decision to quit the movies just in time, before the gods of fashion lost the plot—or, at any rate, the reliance on line and structure that had flattered and fortified her particular poise. Some of her clothes from the nineteen-sixties and seventies, like an Yves Saint Laurent caftan in orange and pink, with a high, jewelled collar, are enough to make your eyes water, and what Head would have said about the albino squid that appeared to have landed on Princess Grace’s scalp, in lieu of a hat, when she visited President and Mrs. Kennedy in 1962, I shudder to imagine. If you want to see Hollywood at the last gasp of its otherworldliness, before the old glory gave way, consult the photograph of Kelly and her fellow-presenter, Audrey Hepburn, backstage at the Academy Awards in 1956. (Kelly had returned to present an award.) Both are in profile, gazing in expectation, and both wear white gloves. They could be at their first Communion.

A month later, Kelly was on the S.S. Constitution, heading for the South of France. If you buy the heavy hints dropped by Wendy Leigh, in “True Grace: The Life and Times of an American Princess” (2007), Kelly found time on board to make loud intimate merriement with a photographer. And, a month after that, moviegoers in New York could go to see “The Wedding in Monaco,” a half-hour documentary, in festive Cinemascope. The poster I saw for this, in Rome, had painted head shots of Rainier and Kelly, as if they were the stars of a feature film. And so

the debate continues, even now: slaver-ing man-eater or virgin bride? In truth, Grace Kelly owes her primal power to the gusto with which we go on telling stories about her, layering the carnal with the fairy-tale. If you are Spoto, for instance, you are swept away by her fling with Oleg Cassini, the designer, whom she almost married—a classic nineteen-fifties playboy, with his worm-thin mustache and walnut tan, like a weak-chinned Errol Flynn. In Rome, you can see his proposal, on a scrap of paper (“*Io ti amo e ti voglio sposare*”), and the handwriting is that of a nine-year-old, but Spoto is agog at Cassini’s “almost princely demeanor and a courtly manner that usually left women breathless.” That is how we think and write when our fancy is inflamed but our facts are weak, and, in Kelly’s case, no one is immune. Alec Guinness, filming “The Swan” with Louis Jourdan, reported to his wife:

I’ve spent the evening with Louis and his wife, just the three of us, in scandalous gossip, mostly about Grace Kelly, who for all her sweetness we think is Miss Enigma 1955-1975.

In the event, the enigma lasted a while longer, till 1982. That was when her Rover crashed, with Princess Grace and her daughter Stéphanie inside. They had driven past the spot where Kelly enjoyed a flirtatious picnic in “To Catch a Thief,” along the roads where her carefree handling of a sports car had petrified Cary Grant. The ghost of Hitchcock trailed her to the end, and rightly so; it was he who had summoned forth her unmistakable blend of yearning and reserve. If “Rear Window” outshines her other films, it is because, for once, she got to join in with the mythologizing: her character picks on another, a middle-aged man across the yard, and embroiders his existence, picking up every thread of detail, just as we do with Grace Kelly. That is why women, no less than men, devote themselves to her case; you don’t desire her, but you urgently want to know what she desired, and what she longed to flee. The causes of love, we instinctively feel, ask to be loved back, which is why Don Hartman wrote to Grace Kelly, on July 23, 1954, after seeing “The Country Girl,” and closed with a request: “In the next world, will you marry me?” ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

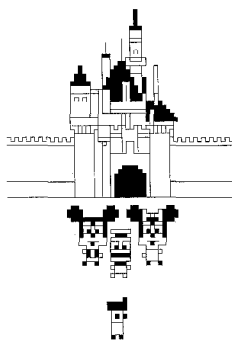
Just Like Us, by Helen Thorpe (Scribner; \$27.99). Over the course of several years, Thorpe shadowed a group of four friends from immigrant families in Denver. Two of the girls hold legal documents, two do not. Against the odds, each finds her way into a good college, but the hurdles only mount from there. Student loans are not an option when you don’t have a Social Security number, and if your parents face deportation your siblings may be moving into the dorm. Like her subjects, Thorpe straddles two worlds: she is both a journalist and the wife of Denver’s mayor. Despite the occasional lapse into bland civic boosterism, she is meticulously observant, always attuned to the poignant ironies of her topic. One undocumented mother, a sometime housecleaner, confides that she wants her “children always to be behind a desk.” Even as Thorpe cheers the young women’s academic triumphs, she begins to wonder whether education (or, indeed, any individual accomplishment) can offer a panacea for the “state of irresolution” that they inhabit.

The Last Empress, by Hannah Pakula (Simon & Schuster; \$35). During the Second World War, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, née Soong May-ling, was not only the First Lady of China but the secretary-general of the Chinese Air Force. In 1950, as First Lady of Taiwan, she suggested to General Douglas MacArthur that she lead a guerilla movement to reclaim the mainland from Mao. “I would be the last one the enemy would suspect,” she noted. Ruthless and vain, charismatic and sly, she spoke English with a Georgia accent and looked, as *Time* put it, “more like next month’s *Vogue* than the avenging angel of 422,000,000 people.” Pakula’s biography makes it clear that Madame Chiang lived one of the most extraordinary lives of the twentieth century. At the very least, she was among the few who saw the whole thing: born

in 1897, she died in 2003, in New York City, an Upper East Side eccentric in an eighteen-room apartment.

As God Commands, by Niccolò Ammaniti, translated from the Italian by Jonathan Hunt (Black Cat; \$14.95). “It’s when you’re sleeping that they fuck you over!” Rino, an alcoholic skinhead, warns his thirteen-year-old son Cristiano at the beginning of this gritty, suspenseful novel. The two live in squalor in a small Italian town, their isolation relieved only by Rino’s two friends—Quattro Formaggi, the village idiot, and Danilo, a man desperate and crazed after the loss of his wife and child. When the three men hatch a plot to rob a bank, the plan goes awry, resulting in an act of gruesome violence that leaves Cristiano alone, sorting out the night’s tangled events. Ammaniti builds the tale in tense cinematic cross-cuttings. At first, his characters seem only brutal and repulsive, beasts who are “tired, drained, and reduced,” but the story uncovers their humanity and tenderness. The result is grim but redemptive.

If I Were Another, by Mahmoud Darwish, translated from the Arabic by Fady Joudah (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; \$28). No poet is as closely associated with contemporary Palestinian identity as Darwish, who died in 2008, but, as this superbly translated selection of poems proves, the work resists classification, ranging over such themes as memory, inheritance, and exile. Landscape, the celebration of it and the longing for it, is evoked both by declaration (“Each war teaches us to love nature more”) and in metaphor (“cut the braids of your olive trees to match/the soldiers’ hair”). The poet’s chronic heart disease is a recurrent concern. In “Mural,” he asks, “What good is the soul if my body/is ill and unable to perform/its primary function?” While Darwish welcomes the collective into his vision—“Every living thing/flyes”—in the end he acknowledges his independence: “I am me,/ nothing else.”



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MUSICAL EVENTS

NOWHERE BOUND

A night of Schubert and Beckett.

BY ALEX ROSS

Schubert's "Winterreise," twenty-four numbingly beautiful songs on texts by Wilhelm Müller, opens with the lines "I came here as a stranger / A stranger I depart." The words seem to be a typical specimen of Romantic angst, but Schubert transforms them into a kind of philosophical motto. The first song, "Gute Nacht," is in walking rhythm, with accents implying a determined stride. It is in D minor, the iconic tragic key of Mozart and Beethoven, although the steady pace suggests that tragedy has been internalized, made into a way of life. And the principal melody, which moves in steeply descending phrases, is positioned with extraordinary precision between ancient balladry and the questing spirit of the art-song tradition, which Schubert more or less invented. The absence of conventional sentiment is what frees the song from its Romantic context and takes it into the eternal present. The contentment of a solitary winter stroll mixes with a deeper, more abstract dread—that of a man proceeding through life in a disaffected trance, counting off the steps toward death. The musicologist Karol Berger has claimed, boldly but plausibly, that Schubert's cycle is "our civilization's greatest poem of existential estrangement and isolation."

Berger mentions Samuel Beckett in the same breath as Schubert, and he is hardly the only commentator to do so. "Winterreise," or "Winter Journey," unfolds like a Beckett play, in a landscape as vivid as it is vague. A man is walking out of a village on a snowy road, lamenting that his beloved has spurned him. He watches a weather-vane spin, feels tears freezing on his face, looks for the woman's footprints, stands by a linden tree where he once carved words of love. A river flowing beneath a crust of ice reminds him of a heart beating inside a cold body. His

soles burn. A will-o'-the-wisp leads him astray. He sleeps in a charcoal burner's cottage. He dreams of spring and wakes to cawing ravens. Events grow stranger: the blowing of a post horn makes him hope for a letter, even though he is of no address; a crow flies around his head; a fluttering leaf appears to hold his fate in the balance. He returns to the village, where dogs bark and rattle their chains. Then he returns to the road, avoiding all signposts to familiar places. He comes upon a graveyard, which he pictures as an inn of eternal rest. There is no vacancy. He walks on. A burst of courage: "Lamenting is for fools." Mock suns in the sky. Longing for night. Finally, in "Der Leiermann," he meets an ancient organ-grinder, who plays a tune for no one and "lets it all go on as it will."

Beckett himself recognized the kinship. A music lover and an amateur pianist, he felt closer to Schubert than to any other composer. Beckett's radio play "All That Fall" begins with the strains of "Death and the Maiden." The teleplay "Nacht und Träume" employs a fragment of the Schubert song. The writer once reported to his cousin John Beckett that he was spending his days listening alone to "Winterreise"—"shivering through the grim journey again." His final play, "What Where," ends with an allusion to the cycle:

It is winter.
Without journey.
Time passes.
That is all.
Make sense who may.
I switch off.

Those lines are almost a précis of the music itself. On some level, there is no journey, no movement; the cycle keeps circling back to the same textures and motifs. "Wegweiser," the song of the signposts, echoes the ambling tempo, the repeating chords, and the obstinate one-note patterns of "Gute Nacht." The

wanderer always finds himself on the same road out of the same village, nowhere bound.

The British director Katie Mitchell, in collaboration with the tenor Mark Padmore, the actor Stephen Dillane, and the pianist Andrew West, had the excellent idea of creating a theatre piece around Beckett's intense relationship with "Winterreise," weaving his poetry and prose into a live performance of the cycle. The resulting production, titled "One Evening," had its première in Aldeburgh, England, last May, and came to John Jay College in early December, under the auspices of Lincoln Center's Great Performers series. A few days before, Great Performers, which has been experimenting inventively with concert formats in recent years, presented another Mitchell piece, "Four Quartets," in which a recitation of the T. S. Eliot poems adjoins a performance of Beethoven's String Quartet Opus 132.

"One Evening" was not an evening for Schubert purists. First of all, we didn't hear "Winterreise" complete; two songs were cut, and others were heard in fragmentary form or merely spoken, with Beckett and Schubert intermittently overlapping. A constant stream of electronic and hand-made noise, in the style of an old-school radio play, underpinned the music. Dillane, who assumed the role of the journeying protagonist, breathed heavily into a microphone and mimicked the sound of feet crunching on snow. Padmore, even when he was singing, busied himself turning a wind machine, rustling twigs, pouring water from a jug into a cup, and so on. West was also given various sound-effect assignments. At times, it seemed as though "Winterreise" were being played alongside John Cage's "Water Walk" or some other exercise in conceptual composition.

I found it an alternately fascinating and frustrating spectacle. For long stretches, there was too much going on—especially given that Schubert and Beckett were both masters of the minimal, telling gesture. (Beckett, in his letters, praised the composer's "rigid economy of application.") Whenever I felt ready to immerse myself in either artist's threadbare world, the multitasking interrupted my reverie. Padmore is one of the most distinctive lyric singers on the contemporary scene—he has recorded a starkly lovely "Winterreise," with Paul Lewis at the piano, for the Har-

monia Mundi label—but his sweet-toned, nuanced tenor often seemed lost in the melee, even with the use of amplification. Perhaps the way to do it would have been to present the piece twice, the second time in near- or total darkness.

All the same, Mitchell's intricate vision had me thinking about "Winterreise" for days. She brought home the startling

audience. It was a furiously committed interpretation, and the staging kept you riveted on the music.

In the end, the focus of "One Evening" was less on Schubert than on Beckett, and the production worked best as an oblique dramatization of those occasions when the writer absorbed "Winterreise" in isolation. In the final minutes, Beckett took over:



The tenor Mark Padmore performing Schubert's "Winterreise," which Beckett admired.

specificity of Schubert's writing—his evocation of rattling dog chains in the slow trills of "Im Dorfe," or of ice cracking over the river's flow in the quick detached chords of "Auf dem Flusse." The strangeness of Schubert's dreamscape was heightened at every turn. And it was a relief to be released from the routine of the lieder recital, where the houselights usually remain at a level suitable for the keynote address at a medical convention. To watch an experienced director training her sights on concert culture is to realize how bland, and fundamentally anti-musical, the standard format has become. In "Four Quartets," following Dillane's bravura recitation of the Eliot poems, the Miró Quartet played the Beethoven under a hanging lamp, the musicians facing each other rather than the

Dillane intoned, in an icily lyrical voice, the late-period prose fragment that gave the event its name. "He was found lying on the ground," the piece begins. "No one had missed him. No one was looking for him. An old woman found him. To put it vaguely. . . . He wore a greatcoat in spite of the time of year." The audience automatically pictured the wanderer of "Winterreise," his body apparently discovered in the spring thaw. Droning from an upright piano was the open fifth that sounds through "Der Leiermann." The conventional interpretation is to see the organ-grinder as a personification of death, leading the traveler to his grave, but here the song conjured up an uncanny scene of Schubert and Beckett meeting face to face, in the place where beauty and bleakness converge. ♦

GOING NATIVE

"Avatar" and "Sherlock Holmes."

BY DAVID DENBY

James Cameron's "Avatar" is the most beautiful film I've seen in years. Amid the hoopla over the new power of 3-D as a narrative form, and the excitement about the complicated mix of digital animation and live action that made the movie possible, no one should ignore how lovely "Avatar" looks, how luscious yet freewheeling, bounteous yet strange.

As Cameron surges through the picture plane, brushing past tree branches, coursing alongside foaming-mouthed creatures, we may be overcome by an uncanny sense of emerging, becoming, transcending—a sustained mood of elation produced by vaulting into space. Working with a crew of thousands, Cameron has reimagined nature: the movie is set on Pandora, a distant moon with thick forests, alpine chasms, and such fantastic oddities as wooded mountains hanging in the sky. The geographical center of the movie is a giant willow tree where a tribal clan, the Na'vi, worships the connections among all living things—a dubious-sounding mystical concept that the movie manages to make exciting. In "Titanic," Cameron turned people blue as they died in icy waters, but this time blue is the color of vibrant health: the Na'vi are a translucent pale blue, with powerful, long-waisted bodies, flat noses, and wide-set eyes. In their easy command of nature, they are meant to evoke aboriginal people everywhere. They have spiritual powers and, despite their elementary weapons—bows and arrows—real powers, too. From each one's head emerges a long braid ending in tendrils that are alive with nerves. When the Na'vi plug their braids into similar neural

cords that hang from the heads of crested, horselike animals and giant birds, they achieve *zahelu*, which is not, apparently, as pleasurable as sex, but somewhat more useful—the Na'vi's thoughts govern the animals' behavior. Cameron believes in hooking up: this world is as much a vertical experience as a horizontal one, and the many parts of it cohere and flow to-



Corporate interests come under fire in James Cameron's movie.

gether. The movie is a blissful fantasy of a completely organic life.

The Na'vi's turf is also rich with an energy-yielding mineral called Unobtainium (which is as close as Cameron comes to a joke in this movie). Eager to harvest the mineral, corporate predators, joined by heavily armed military contractors, have established a base on Pandora. They've

been feeding people's DNA into long, pale-blue versions of their bodies—avatars—and setting them loose among the Na'vi, where they learn their lingo and try to argue them off the land. A high-powered biologist (Sigourney Weaver), who loves the Na'vi, has been to the woods and back many times. She is followed by Jake (Sam Worthington), an ex-marine. He has withered legs, but, reconditioned as an avatar, he can spring and jump anywhere; he's fearless, and as wild as a monkey. His job, if he can't persuade the Na'vi to leave, is to find out enough about them so that contractors can come in and kill them. The next stage of the fable isn't exactly a surprise: living among the Na'vi, Jake falls in love with a warrior princess, Neytiri (Zöe Saldana), who looks like a painted amazon

on a Milan runway. She teaches him the native ways, and protects him from the other Na'vi, who discover that he's a spy. It's the old story of Pocahontas and John Smith, mixed, perhaps, with the remnants of Westerns (like "Dances with Wolves") in which a white man spends some time with the Comanche or the Sioux and then, won over, tries to defend the tribe against the advancing civilization that will annihilate it.

Science is good, but technology is bad. Community is great, but corporations are evil. "Avatar" gives off more than a whiff of nineteen-sixties counter-culture, by way of environmentalism and current antiwar sentiment. "What have we got to offer them—lite beer and bluejeans?" Jake asks. Well, actually, life among the Na'vi, for all its physical glories, looks a little dull. True, there's no reality TV or fast food, but there's no tennis or Raymond Chandler or Ella Fitzgerald, either. But let's not dwell on the senti-

mentality of Cameron's notion of aboriginal life—the movie is striking enough to make it irrelevant. Nor is there much point in lingering over the irony that this anti-technology message is delivered by an example of advanced technology that cost nearly two hundred and fifty million dollars to produce; or that this anti-imperialist spectacle will invade every available the-

FRANK STOCKTON

atre in the world. Relish, instead, the pterodactyls, or the flying velociraptors, or whatever they are—large beaky beasts, green with yellow reptile patches—and the bright-red flying monster with jaws that could snap an oak. Jake, like a Western hero breaking a wild horse, has to tame one of these creatures in order to prove his manhood, and the scene has a barbaric splendor. The movie's story may be a little trite, and the big battle at the end between ugly mechanical force and the gorgeous natural world goes on forever, but what a show Cameron puts on! The continuity of dynamized space that he has achieved with 3-D gloriously supports his trippy belief that all living things are one. *Zahelu!*

Guy Ritchie's hyperbolic "Sherlock Holmes" isn't a movie; it's a franchise. Or, at least, a would-be franchise. Arthur Conan Doyle's material has been grabbed by its velvet collar and thrown into twenty-first-century media culture. Such a turn was inevitable. The subdued charm of Conan Doyle's hansom cabs, enveloping fogs, and courteous manners, in which the façade of gentility is broken up so delightfully by devilish conspiracies, is not of our age. In Ritchie's version, the façade doesn't even exist: his London is rubbled and mucky, with beggars underfoot, and fouled by half-finished industrial monstrosities. Ritchie's visual style, aided by the cinematographer Philippe Rousselot, is graphic-novel Victoriana: there are steampunk interiors—iron-works and infernal machines with a retro-futuristic look—and dim laboratories in which everything looks rank. The movie is grimly overproduced and exhausting, an irritating, preposterous, but fitfully enjoy-

able work, in which every element has been inflated. The task that faces Holmes here isn't merely to solve a murder mystery but to prevent a massacre led by a black-hearted villain who wants to tyrannize England and then take back the American colonies (the bounder!). The plot is perfervid hokum pumped up to justify the movie's portentous look, and, for extra juice, it has squeezed pop elements from martial-arts movies, "Fight Club," and "The Da Vinci Code." There are secret rituals, unspeakable practices, symbols, codes, and many, many fights. Holmes (Robert Downey, Jr.), bare-chested, engages in Victorian extreme boxing before a howling arena of Englishmen with bad teeth. Dr. Watson (Jude Law) is a fighter, too, wielding cane and sabre, palm and foot. The two heroes take on a variety of bruisers with karate, jujitsu, and, for all I know, Musti-Yuddha and GongKwon Yusul. Total fighting machines, those Baker Street boys.

The excess and the extravagance extend even to Holmes and Watson's quarters, which are so cluttered that you can't pick out a single item in the chaos. But you see the two men clearly enough, and Downey and Law are terrific together. For me, watching them act is the movie's principal pleasure. Holmes, in this interpretation, is an intellectual with a vast knowledge of arcane matters, but he's also a brawler and a prankster, and he's formidably street-smart. Downey, like Johnny Depp, has found a way of remaining hip in the most grossly frivolous and commercial projects—a quick wiggle of the eyes, a half smile, a beat or two of silence, and he conveys that he realizes it's all nonsense. His attitude is: Yes,

I know, but why not come along for the ride? The screenwriters, Michael Robert Johnson, Anthony Peckham, and Simon Kinberg, have helped create a bond between Downey and the audience with neat little jokes. Holmes's famous ratiocination is now at the service of a man of action. In slow motion, we see the fighting techniques he plans to use against an opponent (he narrates the blows for us, insisting on the logical rightness of each one); then we see his attack again, in lightning-quick flashes.

Challenged by Downey's energy, Jude Law, who often seems aimless in his movies, comes fully up to speed. He's virile and quick-witted, and his Watson, if not Holmes's equal in brainpower, comes close to him in daring. Their repartee evokes the banter of lovers in a screwball comedy; they flirt outrageously but chastely. Watson, it seems, wants to get married (to Kelly Reilly, of the freckled cheek and bosom), and Holmes tries to break up the engagement. He can't bear to let Watson go, and Watson has some doubts, too—they have always had so much fun getting into scrapes together. But Holmes, eunuch-cold for years, also feels the allure of a woman: Irene Adler (Rachel McAdams), his long-lost inamorata, turns up as a criminal. At the end, the principals live to fight again, and Professor Moriarty, who is present but mostly unseen throughout the movie, waits patiently in the dark for the inevitable sequel that will reveal his face. ♦

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David Denby and Richard Brody discuss "Avatar" and the best films of the decade.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Leo Cullum, must be received by Sunday, January 3rd. The finalists in the December 14th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 18th issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the U.S. or Canada (except Quebec) age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit www.newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION



"So you're the infamous Sudsy Malone."
Dave Barber, Columbus, Ohio



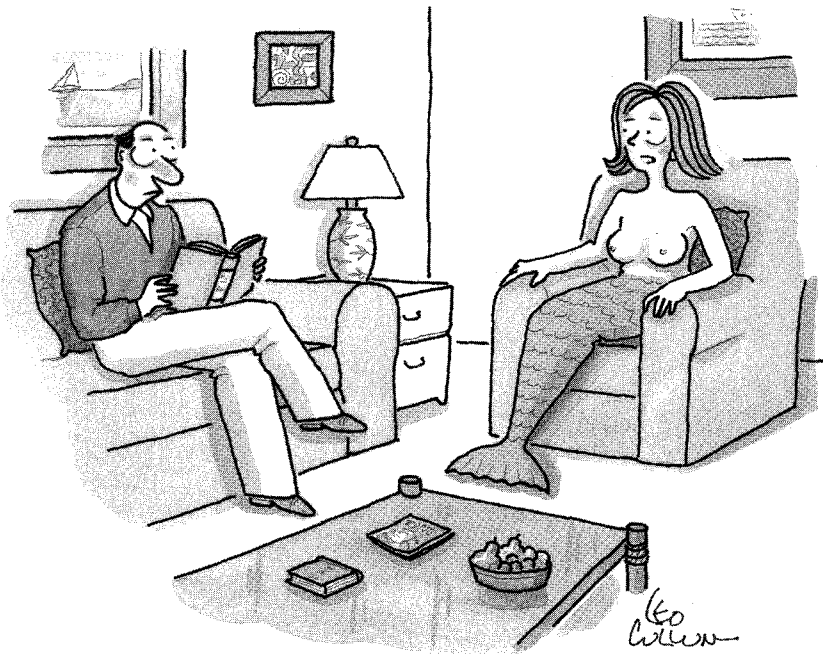
THE FINALISTS

"So, for the record, are you a duck or a rabbit?"
Anne Murphy, Ann Arbor, Mich.

"Yes, Mr. Rabbit also needs to quit drinking."
Terry Keshner, Forest Park, Ill.

"Avoid direct sunlight."
Emily Wurtz, Chevy Chase, Md.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



One day, you may have to
tell your grandchildren stories
about places like this.

that within 100 years, natural lands and water
will become scarce. Climate change will irreversibly
change the habitats that support all life could be

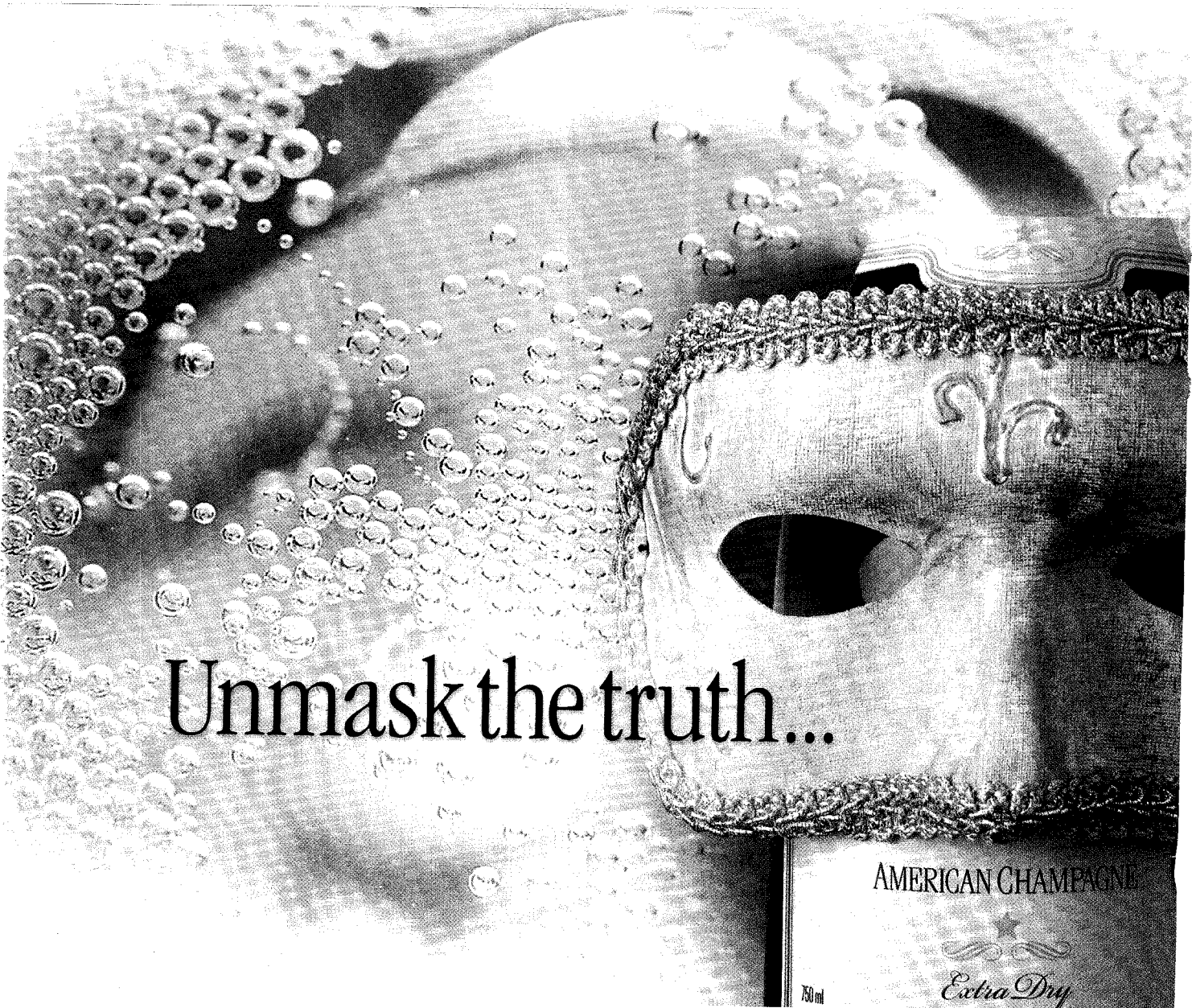
mission to protect the future of our natural world.
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Unmask the truth...

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It's not just subprime mortgages and derivative insurance that bury honesty in legal mumbo jumbo. A legal loophole allows some U.S. wines to masquerade as something they're not.

There are many fine sparkling wines, but only those from **Champagne** can use that region's name. Names of American wine regions like Napa Valley and Willamette are also misused.

Consumer groups agree: deceptive wine labeling must stop. Tell Congress to protect consumers. Sign the petition at www.champagne.us.

Champagne *only* comes
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